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Oltean, Anca

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# The creation of the League of Nations

*Anca OLTEAN\**

## **1. The consequences of the ending of the First World War**

The real cause of the outburst of the First World War was the dismantling of the system of the balance of powers in Europe and the fight of great European states for supremacy. It have to be taken into consideration also other aspects such as the imperialist rivalry outside Europe, the German challenge in front of British naval supremacy, the wish of French to take back Alsace and Lorreine or the ambitions of Russia to control the Constantinople and the channels Bosfor and Dardanele.

It existed also a pretext, the assasination of archiduke Franz Ferdinand, fact that determined the declaration of war to Serbia by the Austro- Hungary. Russia mobilized in the suport of Serbia and Germany declared war to France and Russia. In the conflict it came up also England because of the fact that Germany refused to respect the neutrality of Belgium.

After in 1914, the American president Woodrow Wilson pronounced himself for the neutrality of United States towards the war, in 1917, in the context of the attacks against American vessels from the neutral waters by the German submarines, Wilson sustained the entrance of United States in the war. In 1917 there were sent in Europe aproximatively one million of American soldiers.

Probably the most important aspect of this war was that United States, promoting until then an international isolation according to Monroe doctrine according to which America was of Americans and Europe of Europeans, accepted to get involved in the war. But of the same importance, is the fact that the renonciation to Monroe doctrine was only a temporary attitude, the refusal of American Senate to ratify the Covenant of the League of Nations and the Treaty of Versailles, but also the signing by USA of separated treaties of peace with the defeated powers, proving this idea. Still, the importance of the moment can not be diminished, the

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\* PhD research at the University of Oradea, Department of International Relations and European Studies. E-mail: olteananca@hotmail.com

intervention of United States in Europe proving maybe for the first time the affirmation of United States as a great universal power.

Aspiration towards security and stability, existent at the end of the war was the factor that determined the creation of the League of Nations. But the context in which this idea took shape was precarious. The costs of the war were huge for Europe, both in human field, but also in the material one. The war costed Europe 8 millions of deceased persons and 6 millions of ingered people. France suffered at this chapter the hardest loss (1.300.000 of deceased persons and 3.000.000 of ingered persons)<sup>1</sup>.

Speaking about the material cost of the war, the most seriously affected regions were the regions transformed in teatre of war: North-Eastern France, Belgium, Netherlands, North-Eastern Italy, Serbia, Romania, European Russia. France lost 30% of the fleet, and UK 20% of the fleet.

In order to get sources of financing for the war expenditure, the allies apealled to internal and external loans. The internal loans determined the rise of the public debts (in France from 33, 5 to 219 milliards golden francs, in UK from 17,6 to 196,6 milliards and in Germany from 6 to 169 milliards)<sup>2</sup> (Milza & Berstein, 1998: 106). The external loans were made especially from United States from which France borrowed 33 milliards golden Francs, UK 32 miliards and Italy 20 milliards. To these money, United States was not willing to give up, fact demonstrated also by the vote of the American Senate which refused the annullment of debts. In consequence, European alliate powers wished too to recuperate the losses from the war on the expence of the defeated and, especially, on the side of Germany. This is explained the sevear treatment aplied to Germany to the peace negotiations from Versailles and the attitude hostile of France towards the Germany.

The capitulation of Germany at November 11, 1918 produced somehow in a strange way in the conditions in which Germany lost the war of the Western front, although a year before it won the battle against Russia on Eastern front. The Americans, although they had no territorial claims on the expence of Germany, were the ones who sustained the constinuation of war against Germany until its unconditioned capitulation.

The treaty of Versailles let the problem of Germany unfinished. This was required the reduction of armaments, of the army and the redrawal of the forces behind the Rhine. The enormous reparations which were

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Milza, Serge Berstein, *Istoria secolului XX*, vol. I, Editura All, Bucharest, 1998, p. 103

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 106.

asked from Germany contributed to its full humiliation, but also to the dream that someday it will take its pay back.

Germany was not the only country fallen into disgrace, by a great antipathy enjoying also Russia because of the change of regime imposed by Russian revolution. The Bolshevic government did not manifest any intention to pay the debts of Russia towards the United States of America. After 1920, Russia tried to come back in the world arena through the signation of some comercial agreements with some Occidental states (in 1921 Russia closes commercial agreements with Great Britain and Germany). A certain frustration still remained in the case of Soviet Union so as in the case of Germany, fact that will lead inevitably to their meeting.

## **2. Woodrow Wilson and its role in the creation of the League of Nations**

The origins of Wilson are somehow modest. Born in 1856 in Stanton (Virginia), son of a presbyterian pastor, Woodrow Wilson proved his intelectual performances in the Academic environment both in time of the universitary studies made by Davidson College and College of New Jersey (the future Princeton university), but also during the doctorate studies at John Hopkins University. Before becoming president of United States he was professor and president of the University of Princeton, and then governor of the state New Jersey. In 1912 he was elected as president of United States, democrate candidate, being the 28<sup>th</sup> American president. He had this function during 1912- 1920, benefiting of two mandates.

I could say about Woodrow Wilson that he was a man who tought above his time. From here it results his idealism. Idealist, not because his ideas were not good, but, because they were unapliable in that moment. His thought was profoundly democratic and his intuitions were very accurate. In the moments when he urged the European states to a better treatment granted to Germany, otherwise proving that it could start another war, he did not suspect that the future will prove he was right. Unfortunately, the interwar epoch was not ready to accept the idea of the equality of states no matter of size and power, elaboration of some norms of international law valuable for all the states and which to be aplied efficiently in practice or for dezarmation, democratic ideas, in their essence, proposed by Wilson.

The attitude of Wilson, towards the war was, somehow, ambiguous. In 1914, he was an important sustainer of the neutrality of the United States. Still, United States did not remain outside the conflict, offering herself as a mediator in the solutioning of the conflict, fact demonstrated also by the presence of the colonel House in Europe with the purpose to negotiate the peace, mission failed thow. On January, 1917, when the Germans started the submarine war attacking American vessels, Wilson pronounced himself for

the entrance of United States in the war. On January 22, 1917, president Wilson, hold a Speech entitled "Peace without a victory"<sup>3</sup>. By this syntagm he understood a common peace which will be instaurated after the war, although what hapenned in reality was only a change of the balance of power. Towards the old principle of European system of balance of powers, Woodrow Wilson was completely hostile<sup>4</sup>. Finally, what had seen Wilson by common peace it could be explained as such: no part of the beligerants had not to strive the other, that is why, it will be a peace without victory, because the victorious will not impose intolerable sacrifices which to determine resignation and eventual future hostilities. He was wrong about the strategy of the victorious, but he expected future hostilities. The treaty of Versailles proved as being contrary to the previsions of Wilson, this treaty containing very severe measures towards Germany and being considered a genuine "Diktat".

The purpose for which United States entered into war was uninterested and generous, fact acknowledged by Wilson that considered that the objective of the United States is to defend the principle of peace and justice against the selfish and autocratic power<sup>5</sup>. Concerning the German people, Wilson declared that he does not feel animosity and that they are used by their elites. Unfortunately, his attitude was not regarded as an example.

After the entrance of United States in the war, Wilson lunched in front of Congress at January 8 its famous "fourteen points" in which he proposed measures that would have been implemented after the end of the war. In essence, the ideas that result from these lead to economic freedom, dezarmation, open negotiations, considerations regarding other states (mainly the ones coming from Austro- Hungaria) and, last but not least, the creation of a global organization having as task the maintenance of the international security.

For a better analysis, I will formulate these points:

- a.- open negociations for peace with free participation (not to exist secret treaties)
- b.- free navigation on sea outside the territorial waters
- c. the equality of commerce and the dismanteling of economic barriers.

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<sup>3</sup> Sanderson Beck, *Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations*, Internet: <http://www.san.beck.org/WP20-LeagueofNations.html>

<sup>4</sup> Jean Baptiste Duroselle, *Histoire diplomatique de 1919 à nos jours*, Editions Dalloz, Paris, 1993, 57.

<sup>5</sup> Beck, *op. cit.*

d. – adequate guarantees given and received that the national armaments will be reduced to the lowest point corresponding to internal security

e.- impartial adjustment of all colonial pretensions measuring equally the interests of the populations with the demands of governments

f. – the evacuation of Russian territory, the possibility for the Russians to choose their own institutions and to get help according to their wishes and needs

g.- evacuation and restauration of Belgium under its own sovereignty

h.- the eliberation and restauration of French territory invaded in 1871 and the return of Alsace and Lorreine to France.

i.- a redrawing of the Italian frontiers should be made on the line of the separation of nationalities.

j.- the population from Austria – Hungary should receive freely the right to an autonomos development

k. – Romania, Serbia, Montenegro should be evacuated and restaured and the boundaries of Balcanic States should receive international guarantees of independence and territorial integrity.

l. Turcia herself needs security, but also the other nationalities should be freed from the Turkish rule and it should be provided to them the autonomous deveopment, while the streches Bosfor and Dardanele should be open to all ships and commerce with international guarantees

m.- an independant Poland should include territories of Polish populations, to have access to the sea and guaranteed teritorial integrity

n.- a general Association of nations must be formed according to some specific deals with the purpose to allow mutual guarantees of political independance and territorial integrity both of big and small states.

Some of this wilsonian points will be found in the objectives formulated by the pact of the Leagues of Nations.

Wilson decided to participate to the Paris Peace Conference with a group of exerts in different fields (geographers, etnologists, economists), but it did not have the inspiration to invite aso members of the Senate, fact that determind maybe the American Senators to be more reticent after the ratification of the treaty. Wilson enjoyed a great welcoming in Europe, in his discourses from Paris, Manchester, Roma, a lot of Europeans coming to welcome him. And, in 1920, Wilson received the Nobel prize for peace.

### **3. The treaty of peace from Paris. Reglementations and significations**

The choice of Paris as a centre for signing the peace negotiations was not very sure at the beginning. Several centres were taken into

disussions (London, Bruxelles, Hague, Geneve, Lausanne, Versailles or Paris). After some opinions, it would have been better that this conference not to be hold at Paris, city that kept so alive the memory of the war and whose air was full of resentments.<sup>6</sup> For instance, the colonel House was saying that it would have been better that this conference to be placed somewhere else, away from the intrigues of Paris. From sentimental and moral reasons, because France had the hardest suffering after the war, it was voted finally for Paris (Versailles).

***a. Reglementations with general character of the treaty***

The Peace Conference took place during January 12 – June 28, 1919 and reunited thirty allied countries. The discussions took place during the plenary sessions and in the sixteen committees of experts. A more important organ was the Council of the Ten who grouped the chiefs of governments and external affairs ministers of United States, Great Britain, France, Italy, Japan. But the essential organ of decision was the Council of the Four (Wilson, Lloyd George, Clemenceau, Orlando).

The Treaty of Versailles was signed at June 28, 1919 in the room of the Mirrors. It contained reglementations of territorial, economic, financial, military nature.

From a territorial point of view it can be said that Germany lost 1/7 from its territory (88 000 kmp) and 1/10 of its population (8 million). It ceased in the favour of France the provinces Alsace and Lorraine, in the favour of Belgium: the cantons Eupen and Malmedy. After a plebiscite, Germany lost in the favour of Danemark the Northern Schleswig, and Saar region passed after a period of 15 years under the administrations of the League of Nations, following that at the end of this period to have decided its faith by plebiscite. During this time, the mines from Saar were given to exploitation to France as a compensation for the destroyal by the Germans of the French mines from North. Pomeronia and Oriental Prussia (partially) were ceased to Poland to whom it was assured through a corridor the door to the sea through the port of Danzig, German city found under the controll of the League of Nations. Germany will never accept its Oriental frontiers. Also, Germany lost all his collonies, administered starting from 1919 under the form of mandate by influent states of the League of Nations.

The economic and financial clauses has as a target Germany which, being considered responsible by the disasters of war, was forced to payment of some huge reparations (initially 132 milliards golden DM). Germany had to give up his commercial vessels and war machines and to grant the

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<sup>6</sup> Consuela Langsam Walter, *Documents and readings in the history of Europe since 1918*, W.C. Langsam – New York: Kraus Reprint, 1969, XXV, p.4.

winners the most favourite nation clause treatment. Germany, also, had to acknowledge the internationalization of its fluvial water courses.

From a military point of view, the clauses of this nature reduced the German army to 100 000 of people, abolished in Germany the military obligatory service, pretended the ceasing of the fleet. Germany was forbidden to have heavy artillery, aviation or tanks.

### ***b. Projects regarding the statute of the League of Nations<sup>7</sup>***

Although the term of League or Society of Nations appeared for the first time at Leon Bourgeois in 1908, the associations constituted in states such as France, UK, United States with the purpose of creation of such organization appeared somehow later. In United States in the support of the idea of League of Nations they were people of high prestige such as the presidents Roosevelt and Taft. In 1915, it took birth the League for the support of Peace sustained by Taft.

In fact, the first concrete project concerning the constitution of a League of Nations was launched in 1916 by the Woodrow Wilson. There were launched a lot of polemics in connection to this. State secretary Bryan was militating for bilateral treaties between states which to push them to enquette and arbitrage in case of conflict. He militated also for a mutual pact which to guarantee the territorial integrity and political independence of states parts. The vision of Wilson was through comparison much more larger, the organization foreseen by him having several purposes: the assurance of collective guarantees, of economic prosperity, of access to natural resources, of liberty of circulation and safety of maritime navigation, considering the administration of the colonies under the form of mandates.

In what concerns the foreseen of war, this had to be achieved in American view through open diplomacy, appeal of public opinion, economic sanctions, but not military. The British pronounced for economic sanction and military, while the French wanted the institution of some permanent international army.

The dezarmation and arms controll were regarded as some peace guarantees. But, even here, existed clashes of opinions. The Americans wanted a general limitation of armaments and the prohibition of private arms production. The Britanics pronounced for the abolishment of military obligatory service and, the French, having more resentments, wished the dezarmation only in the case of Germany.

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<sup>7</sup> Informations with regard to the projects created having in view the statute of the League of Nations in L. Gyemant, *Preistoria construcției europene*, Efes, Cluj- Napoca, 1999, p. 63-66.



Concerning the institutional structure of the future organization it was foreseen the existence of a Council, the main decisional organ of the future League. While the Britanics sustained exclusively the idea of a new restrained number of permanent members of the Council, the Americans and Italiens had the opinion that it should be also non-permanent members. The General Assembly was foreseen from British perspective as a deliberative forum, convocated without periodicity and with restrained attributions, while the italiens regarded as an organism with precised attributions, including decisional attributions, taken with qualified majority of votes. The Secretariat was regarded from all points of view as a future component of the League of Nations with the task to coordonate and accumulate informations, but without decisional attributes. These points of view constituted the subject of the debates from February- March 1919 in the framework of the Comission of the League of Nations from the Peace Conference from Paris.

### **c. Decisions aproved at Paris concerning the League of Nations**

The Covenant of the League of Nations was included also in the treaty (the first 26 articles) and contained measures referring to the institutions and organization of the League of Nations. They were formulated also some principles which staid on the base of the creation of organisation: dezarmation, arbitrage in front of the Assembly (or of the Court) in case of conflict, economic and military sanctions in case of aggression.(article16)<sup>8</sup>

Let us come back to the endeavours that have been made in the framework of Peace Conference from Paris with the view of creation of the League of Nations. In January 25, 1919 the plenary session of the Peace Conference was adopting in unanimity a resolution according to which the Covenant of the League of Nations was becoming an integrated part of the peace treaties. It was consituted a special commission in which fourteen states were reprezented and whose president was Wilson. The first meeting of the Commission took place in February 3. There existed several proposals concerning the organization and the character of the League of Nations. For example an interesting proposal was coming from the side of Leon Bourgeois who suggested the creation of an international army<sup>9</sup> (Duroselle, 1993: 58) placed at the disposal of the organization, or of a major state, ideaa rejected by Anglo- Saxons, probably because they were afraid that this major state would have been at the disposal of general Foch

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<sup>8</sup> The Covenant of the League of Nations, art. 16, Internet: <http://www.tufts.edu/departments/fletcher/multi/www/league-covenant.html>

<sup>9</sup> Jean Baptiste Duroselle, *op.cit.*, p.58.

which had a hostile attitude towards Germany. Other projects such this I mentioned above.

Finally the project of the League of Nations was presented by President Wilson and accepted in unanimity by the plenary conference from April 28. The project was of English and American inspiration, at its conception contributing Wilson but also David Hunter Miller (American expert) or Sir Cecil Hurst (British expert). This project had become, with very few modifications, the final Pact of the League of Nations. The pact was included in the texts of the Treaty from Versailles (June 28), but also in the text treaties from Saint Germain, Neuilly, Sevres.

At January 16, 1920 it had taken place at Paris, under the presidency of Wilson, the first reunion of the Council of the Society of Nations. In the framework of the Council there were represented states such France, UK, Japan, Belgium, Brasil, Greece.

#### **4. The failure of the ratification of the Treaty from Versailles by USA**

A more or less probable cause of non-ratification by United States of the Treaty of Versailles (and implicitly of the Pact of the League of Nations) was the fact that Wilson omitted the invitation of American senators to make part from the delegation of USA at Paris. But the most important it was the fact that the American public opinion, tributary to the Monroe doctrine, considered that USA paid the price of its intervention in the war of Europe and that America will deal better without Europe than together.

According to the Constitution of United States in order that the treaties to be approved by the Senate it was necessary the consent of qualified majority (2/3 from the total number of votes). In 1919, the Senate of United States had 47 democrats and 49 republicans. The democrat president, Wilson, could rely only on the votes of the 43 democrats because the rest of democrats (4) and 14 republicans were "irrevocables" and, implicitly, against the signing of the treaty. In order to obtain the qualified majority, Wilson had to win on his side 23 of votes of the Republicans. These people, in principle, would have accepted the ratification of the treaty with the condition that this to be amended with some modifications, non-essentia, thow. They were reserved in what concerns the eleventh article which stipulated that the members of the League on Nations take the obligation to respect and preserve the territorial integrity and political independence of all members of the League. In the case when one of them will be agressed or threatened with aggression, the Council of the League of Nations will advise with the means in which this mission will be achieved. (The Covenant of the League of Nations, art. 10) For the president Wilson, this was an essentia point. It was about Monroe doctrine applied to the entire world and protected by everybody.

Wilson tried to diminish the conflicts, asserting that the measures of the Council were more of moral kind, while Lloyd George was asserting that the economic sanctions would prevail on military sanctions.

In order to support his point of view, the president Wilson tried to win the American public opinion and started, in spite of his precarious state of healthiness, a tour of propaganda on the territory of United States in order to convince the Americans by the importance of United States' adherence to the League of Nations<sup>10</sup>. So, during 22 days, he travelled 8000 miles and held 38 speeches. In Pueblo (Colorado) his state of health got worse, and the president returned to Washington where he suffered a hard attack. As a consequence of this illness, the president went out from three months from political life.

In November 19, 1919 the text of the treaty, together with some amendments, obtained in the Senate only 39 of votes in favor of pro-ratification and 55 of votes against. Non-ratification was due to an *incomprehensible phenomenon*<sup>11</sup> because, not wanting to make concessions, not wanting to bring amendments, only its votation in its initial form, Wilson advised the democrats to vote against. It was organized another vote for the ratification of the treaty without amendments in March 19, 1920. They were obtained 49 of votes pro-ratification and 35 of votes against. There would have been necessary 7 votes. Thus the treaty was never ratified by the Senate in United States.

Wilson never gave up and tried to transform the elections from 1920 in a plebiscit. His democate candidate (Cox) was defeated by a republican candidate (Warren G. Harding). Until his death (in 1924), Wilson hoped that the Senate of United States will vote again and will ratify the Covenant of the League of Nations and the Treaty of Versailles. It was not meant to be like that, and the non- involvement of United States in the problem of world security compromised from the very beginning the important initiative that was the League of Nations. The failures of the League in its tryings to maintain the world peace contributed to the ascension of totalitarian regimes in Europe and, finally, to the outburst of the Second World War.

### Abstract

*This paper deals with the international context in which it was created the League of Nations and the aproaches and actions accomplished with the view of creating this organization.*

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<sup>10</sup> See the article, *The League of Nations Fight – A Chronology*, Internet: <http://history.acusd.edu/gen/nw2Timeline/1919League2.html>

<sup>11</sup> Duroselle, *op. cit.* p 60

*In order to reach this objective, I will analyze briefly the consequences imposed by the end of the First World War, the role played by the American president Woodrow Wilson in the promotion of the organization, the significance of peace treaties, especially of the signed at Paris–Versailles, in which it was included the Pact of the League of Nations. It has not be forgotten from our analysis a factor of major importance, namely the non- ratification by the Senate of United States of the Covenant of the League of Nations, fact that lead to the non- participation of United States to the newly created organization.*

**Keywords:** *League of Nations, First World War, United States, Covenant, peace treaties*

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