

Was the 1920s an ‘era of illusion’?

Written by Pamela-Suzanne Dawson

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In his book ‘The Twentieth-Century World, An International History’, William R. Keylor refers to the 1920s and an ‘era of illusion’[1]. The following essay will explore this claim through investigating the economic and security issues surrounding this period and by providing a basic background to the years preceding the 1920s. From the outset, however, it is necessary to understand what is meant by the term ‘illusion’. The Oxford Paperback Dictionary provides two definitions of the term, these being “something that a person wrongly supposes to exist”[2] and “a false belief about the nature of something”[3]. Both of these definitions will be considered in answering the question ‘was the 1920s indeed an ‘era of illusion’?’

If Hollywood is to be believed, the first half of the Twentieth-Century was characterised by traditional moral values and romantic ideals. The 1920s were full of happy maidens marrying their long lost loves who had all miraculously survived World War One. However, if the 1920s of the real world are to be understood, it is advisable to put the era into factual context.

At the end of the First World War, Europe was in disarray. An entire generation had been eliminated[4] and it could be said that the future of those remaining was uncertain. In an attempt to provide some stability, the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 allowed diplomats from each of the victorious countries an opportunity to prevent another humanitarian disaster. Although each participant had their own agenda, the initial aims of the conference were widely agreed: To draft a new peace treaty; to end the state of war; and to redraw the map of Europe[5].

As a result of the Treaty of Versailles signed at the Paris Peace Conference, nine new European countries emerged from territory previously that of Germany and Russia[6] and this was to place strain on relations within Europe over the following years. In addition, the Rhineland, a German industrial zone, was to be demilitarised and put under a fifteen-year occupation and Germany was to have severe limitations placed on its military[7]. For example, there was to be no conscription and the Army would be limited to one hundred thousand men[8], and the German Navy was limited to six ships with the ownership of submarines prohibited[9].

Another vital outcome of the Treaty was the acceptance of Germany being the guilty party for the entire First World War and a reparations bill of £6,600 million was imposed[10]. France was given the power to enforce military action should Germany refuse to make the payments for reparation[11]. Arguably, it was these terms that led to the tensions in the following decades, especially when it is noted that at the time, France had the largest land based army and air force in the World[12].

It could be said that the most significant development of the Paris Peace Conference was the creation of the League of Nations. Woodrow Wilson, the President of the United States of America, orchestrated this formation because in his eyes the only way to prevent another Great War would be under an international system of Collective Security rather than the traditional Balance of Power that had previously dominated Europe[13]. The intention of the League of Nations was to implement sanctions against any country that used military might against another and if needs be to send in combined military from each state in opposition[14]. It was thought that no country would resort to war if the rest of the world was watching and prepared for intervention. However, in reality these ideals were not matched by the internal politics of the nations to be involved.

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The US Congress refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles because it was a threat to the sovereignty of America[15]. The United Kingdom also refused ratification because it saw some of the terms as being excessive[16]; chiefly the amount of money Germany was expected to pay in reparation[17]. In addition, due to the concern of domestic security issues in France the Treaty was never ratified there either[18]. As a result, many of the masses in these countries were outraged, especially as it meant that the Kaiser would not be standing trial for his part in the war[19] (another term in the Treaty). Yet, despite the failure of three of the Big Four to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was still expected to abide by the restrictions placed on its military and pay reparations.

The beginning of the 1920s saw a great deal of economic instability. In Germany, hyperinflation put immense strain on the government and the economy[20]. As a result of this, Germany was increasingly reluctant to pay France reparations. In January 1923, France, Italy and Belgium sent technicians and military support into the Ruhr Valley in order to take over the coalmines in response to the defaulting on payment[21]. The forces remained there for two and a half years, when in 1925 the newly formed Reparation Committee ordered their evacuation and removed the power of implementation of payment from France[22].

During the instability in Europe, America had managed to establish itself as the new power in international exports, far exceeding France and Britain[23]. However, there was an immense feeling of Nationalism in the United States and this led to embargos on immigration and imports[24]. Although this kept wages in the country high, the effect on other nations was more instability[25]. For example, in countries where work was scarce, people tended to leave in order to find employment thus relieving domestic tensions. However, when the United States banned immigrants, in particular those from Asia, there was no longer an outlet for the surplus workers[26].

In addition, the reluctance of the USA to import goods resulted in many countries being unable to repay the loans that they had accrued during the First World War[27]. In reality, the USA had broken the international economic moral of trade being a two-way street[28]. Such action sparked criticism, as it was mainly to America that loan repayments were due[29]. Many felt that because the United States had arrived to the war late, the debts should be written off[30]. In other words, the other countries involved had lost a generation of young men by the time America joined the fighting so the loss of money would be a fair, if not lesser, sacrifice[31].

Towards the end of the 1920s, the Western economy gained in stability[32]. Possibly making some think that the difficulties of the previous decade were long forgotten and that some form of normality was returning. However, in other parts of the world problems were continuing in the form of an agricultural crisis[33]. For instance, in Latin America and Eastern Europe there were major surpluses of foodstuffs that were no longer in as high demand as they once were[34]. As a result, the prices for items such as sugar and cocoa plummeted leaving many economies struggling[35].

In regard to security, the tensions created by the outcomes of the Paris Peace Conference have been briefly mentioned already. Germany refused to give in to the restrictions on its military and arguably managed to develop its weapons and air fleet without breaching the Treaty of Versailles[36]. For example, aeroplanes were built for civilian use that could be easily converted to bombers and materials that could be used for bomb making were developed as fertiliser[37]. It was thought by many that it would be unfair to stop the country rebuilding its civilian sector whilst being penalised in other areas for past actions[38].

During these developments, France was debatably doing its best to ensure the restrictions placed on Germany in the Treaty of Versailles were enforced. An example of such actions is the aforementioned invasion of the Ruhr Valley. In addition, France tried to ensure that Germany remained isolated by forming the ‘Little Entente’ with Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia[39]. By doing so, each of the countries sharing a border with Germany were now allied against it[40], which could be interpreted as provocation rather than a security measure. France also hoped that this action would ensure that Germany paid the reparations that were due[41].

In the mid 1920s, negotiations between France, Germany, Belgium, Italy and Great Britain resulted in the Locarno Treaty, which was a further attempt to ease tensions[42]. Initially it was widely praised with Austen Chamberlain (Great Britain), Gustav Stresemann (Germany) and the French Foreign Minister sharing the Nobel Peace Prize in

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1925[43].

The Treaty recognised the respective borders of Germany, Belgium and France and this was seen as a great achievement in securing peace in Western Europe[44]. However, despite this, Germany still refused to acknowledge the territories in the East were no longer part of the country[45]. Poland in particular felt ‘sold out’ by the West and relations between the areas became fraught with tension[46]. When these tensions were still apparent a couple of years later, France attempted to reassure the Eastern European countries with treaties of friendship and these led to economic connections that were to assist the countries in gaining complete independence from Germany[47].

The latter years of the 1920s were characterised by attempts to keep tensions, especially in Europe, at a minimum. In 1928, the Kellogg-Briand Pact received signatures of sixty-two nations[48]. The objective of this agreement could be compared to that of the Paris Peace Conference but it was still met with vast approval and hope that the First World War would be the only world war[49].

The following year, Briand publicised proposals for what is now known as the European Union[50]. That is, a system of political, economical and social interconnectedness that would provide an even greater amount of stability in Europe[51]. However, these proposals were put on hold in 1930 as the Nazi Party in Germany grew in strength[52].

The 1920s was a difficult era for many involved whether members of the public or of government. Keylor argues that there was an illusion of “Western prosperity” hiding the truth of instability and crises[53]. However, societies throughout the world were trying to move on from the horrors that had been witnessed a few years previously in World War One and this is important to remember when considering anything relating to this period. With hindsight, Keylor is correct to claim that this was in fact an “era of illusion” when the term ‘illusion’ is taken to mean either of the two previously mentioned definitions. However, every diplomat involved in any of the conferences and negotiations at this time were looking after their own interest and that of their respective country rather than looking at the consequences of proposed actions on a larger scale. Maybe this was because psychologically it was more appealing to focus on the positive developments closer to home than acknowledging the negative implications in other countries. Perhaps then, a more accurate description of the 1920s would be an ‘era of ignorance’.

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