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When Winning the Peace Still Mattered

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In historiography and even more so in the media and public culture in general, the post-1945 international settlement has been hailed and mythologized not only as the foundation of the "rule-based order" that is now vanishing, but as the unchallenged model for a durable and just peace. Of course, we had expected further acclaims during the 80th anniversary, Instead, we experienced the deliberate, systemic demolition of the few remaining pillars of that settlement by he Trump Administration. Thus, the anniversary was more funereal than celebratory.

For decades we have grown used to sanctifying 1945 not only as the year of victory over Nazism but as the year in which a sustainable peace structured on enduring institutions, buttressed by an affordable and workable system of international finance and constituted upon a set of moderately inclusive – and therefore self-reinforcing – democratic regimes was conceived.

There were several reasons for this, many of them self-congratulatory. The US celebrated its international dominance garbed in the mantle of

a farsighted, hospitable, benevolent hegemony, while (Western) Europe applauded its unprecedented harmony, prosperity, institutional rewiring, and cultural renewal. Other motives were, and are, more authentic and substantial. It was, after all, the only genuine, self-sustained postwar peace the modern era had experienced since the post-Napoleonic "concert of Europe." It tackled the key issues that the 1919 Versailles Treaty could not countenance and built upon the painful lessons of the 1930s depression.

As our distance from that moment grew more significant, it also came to embody the increasingly relevant, and woefully nostalgic, message that "winning" the peace (i.e. designing, organizing and funding it) was no less important than winning the war. This should have become the dominant theme of any serious 80th anniversary retrospective, mired as we are in 1) forever wars with no peace imaginable, as in the Middle-East; 2) a bloody conflict about the future of Ukraine (and of Europe at large) that exposes the hard truth that the post-1989 settlement turned out to be as much a failure as a success; 3) the effective obliteration of any notion of a social compact by the workings of unfettered market competition, with the ensuing marginalization of democratic prerogatives by the ascending power and authority of private concentrations of capital; and 4) the shift from Western-dominated multilateralism to a less unequal but more antagonistic multipolar configuration of international relations.

All this calls – it seems to me – for a long-term, deeply contextualized, comparative evaluation of the order that was established in the post-WWII era. In 2024, I was asked to open the Italian Modern History Association (SISSCo) conference on "postwar."[1] My assignment was to explore the concept as a defining, perhaps constitutive element in modern history. Since I have dealt with postwar settlements, plans, reconstructions and legacies throughout my career, and since other speakers were to deal with many other possible angles, I decided to focus on peace settlements. I was also encouraged by the recent spate of innovative research, particularly on the post WWI settlement and its antecedents.[2] I assumed that I could

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[1] See https://www.sissco.it/linee-dombra-realta-e-rappresentazioni-dei-dopoguerra-nelle-trasformazioni-delleta-contemporanea/.

[2] Among the most illuminating, Jackson, Mulligan and Sluga 2023; Sluga 2021; Conway, Lagrou and Rousso 2019.

easily join the dots and breeze through it, but it turned out to be a far more interesting and instructive experience, in the first place for myself.

When considered in multiple, varying contexts the concept of postwar settlement loses its usual focus on peace-making. Anti-colonial wars ended with liberation; the (more or less) negotiated withdrawal of the colonial power led to independence, not a peace agreement. In Korea there was a ceasefire and reconstruction but no peace accord. After the US withdrawal, the Vietnam war ended in victory and unification, with neither agreement nor reconciliation. More recent wars – in Afghanistan and Iraq, in Sudan, Libya, Syria or Ethiopia – have seen a fluctuation of military activities rather than a clean break and a peace. The current Russian war in Ukraine may end in peace – or more likely a ceasefire agreement – but most contemporary conflicts seem to bypass, if not upend, the war/peace dichotomy and its neat temporal succession.

Rather than wars with a beginning and an end, they are cycles of belligerence with a varying degree of intensity – often metastasizing into neighbouring areas and loosely connected disputes. The incessant Arab-Israeli, then Israeli-Palestinian and now Israeli-Iranian conflicts are becoming emblematic of the modern reality of wars that morph but do not end. Ever more frequently, peace is not only difficult to arrange but seems to be no longer pursued or imagined, as notions of victory, defeat and renegotiated coexistence are replaced by permanent belligerence (alternately fierce or subdued, but never really overcome and replaced by peace).

As historians, we do not seem to have taken stock of this paradox. Although every war should logically be succeeded by a postwar moment (whether or not defined as such by the populations involved), historiography has conceptualized and investigated *postwar* almost exclusively in those instances in which it brought about systemic change and a lasting settlement. In short, the kind of postwar that emanates from "great power" wars and diplomacy; in empirical terms, the post WWI peacemaking and, most crucially, the post WWII settlement, which has grown to become exemplary and paradigmatic.

What made it so? First, the fact that it found sustainable solutions to the problems that had lacerated Europe, the single place all the great powers deemed crucial. The peacemakers of the late 1940s had learned

from previous failures that a European settlement required Franco-German reconciliation, as the Locarno Pact had suggested but had not accomplished. That in turn required a stable and secure environment, so as to pre-empt any temptation to create a continental hegemony or revanchism. If Germany was to be reinvented (or perhaps, in Konrad Jarausch's terms, "civilized") rather than subjugated, strong security was to be extended to all. What the UK and the US had unwisely refused to France in 1919 now became real with the Atlantic Alliance, which opened the door to Franco-German and, more extensively, European cooperation and integration. Coming on the heels of unconditional surrender, US protection provided a safe landscape in which West Europeans could reinvent their relationships (Bitumi).

The second key factor pertained to the rigid dichotomy between democracy and totalitarianism. It did not matter that Soviet expansionism was more conjectured than real. Its frightening possibility reordered national priorities, elevating international (i.e. Western) collaboration and coordination to a much higher role. If this was one key pillar of the peace, the other rested on the belief that bipolar antagonism should not be allowed to become a real, fighting war; a principle that was shared – not so paradoxically – in Moscow no less than Paris or Washington.

If Moscow ordered its bloc with top-down discipline and a single, rigid economic model, peace and collaboration in the West had multiple roots besides US strategic dominance. Social democratic welfarism, New Deal coordination and Christian corporatism converged in envisaging and building multifaceted national compacts that nonetheless shared a few key features. International control of capital movements as well as regulated trade liberalization; representation of workers', farmers' and industry's interests; public planning of infrastructures and basic services within a mixed economy. Democracy was constructed as an inclusive regime, governed from above rather than left to market dynamics, perhaps conformist rather than libertarian, but certainly far more rewarding for the middle and working classes than any previous or subsequent regime (Milward; Judt; Godard).

Thus, internationalism was substantially upgraded – both institutionally and ideationally – but neither detached from power politics, as best evidenced by the two-tier structure of the UN (Mazower), nor directed

towards post-national utopias. The nation-state reclaimed a pivotal role in steering the economy and cementing public allegiance, but it did so in tightly knit regional groupings and arrangements for defence, trade, and an increasing range of other activities and policies.

If the post-1945 settlement had a single distinctive feature, it was that no major area was ungoverned or left to private, spontaneous dynamics. National economic policies no less than international trade and finance; social provisions as well as tax regimes; interest representation and definitions of rights and obligations; and of course, international collaboration for peace and security. The post-1945 settlement was a state-centered one, because no other entity could bring and hold together the multiplicity of necessary actors, big and small (Mazower, Reinisch and Feldman; Mayers) Peace had to be planned, coordinated, legitimized and constantly reengineered…when governments and societies still thought that winning the peace mattered.

Author's bionote

Federico Romero is Professor Emeritus at the European University Institute. A specialist on twentieth-century international history with numerous books on war and reconstruction, the Cold War, transatlantic relations, and European integration, he taught at the London School of Economics, the University of Bologna and the University of Firenze. In 2015-20 he was PI of the ERC Advanced research project PanEur1970s.

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