

The Versailles Treaty: 'an act of madness unparalleled in history'

by Jacques Cheminade

"After the butchery, the sharing of the spoils." "A vindictive, dishonorable and deceitful treaty, if adopted, would be the precursor of a century of strife and conflict." "The terms are an act of madness unparalleled in history." "A gigantic military conflict leads to a universal international civil war."

These comments on the Versailles Treaty of 1919 were not made many years after, by pro-German commentators measuring its impact, but during the negotiation itself, by leading advocates of the British cause, such as Arthur Ponsonby, Ramsay MacDonald, and John Maynard Keynes. Indeed, right from the beginning, the more intelligent—if morally flawed—leaders on the side of the victors were fully conscious that the world they were building was not one of stability and peace through mutual economic development, not one of "peace without victory" and "respect for Germany," as President Woodrow Wilson had said in his famous Fourteen Points speech of Jan. 9, 1918, but rather "a Punic treatment, prelude to quarrels in a deeply divided and hideously embittered Europe." This world, inherited from the 1814-18 Congress of Vienna, and continued in the Teheran, Yalta, and Potsdam agreements of World War II, is still the world in which we are living today.

True, with the collapse of fascism and Stalinism, the liberation of eastern Europe and the coming fall of "flea market" economics, the conditions for the "era of Versailles" to come to an end are now being met. But history is not made of an "objective trend"; it is determined by the subjective intervention of human beings. Therefore, those "conditions" for an end of Versailles are not a gift bestowed upon us, but a challenge. To avoid a shift from controlled disintegration, the true name of the geopolitics of Versailles, into chaos, we have first to ask ourselves a few questions and then provide historical answers. What has the Treaty of Versailles really accomplished? What were, beyond the treaty itself, the implicit axioms—cultural, economic, scientific, and social—of the Versailles order? How was it possible to perpetrate such an order upon human beings in their right mind?

Strategic aims of the Anglo-Americans

At the end of World War I, the Congress of Paris met on Jan. 18, 1919, and the peace treaty was imposed upon

Germany and signed at the Hall of Mirrors of the Versailles Palace. The symbol was clear to everybody: The "peace" was a continuation of the Congress of Vienna of one century before, and based on "containment, counterrevolution, and geopolitics." The package included an adjustment of borders according to the dictates of the Anglo-American balance of power, and a system of financial control from above through debt management. The indebted nations that fought the war, both the German loser and the French victor, were submitted to the banks of London and, more directly, Washington. John Maynard Keynes put it bluntly: "In 1919, Europe was in complete dependence upon the food supplies of the United States, and financially she was even more absolutely at their mercy." And he adds that America's "delegation had a precocious understanding of economic power as an instrument of control in the international politics of this dawning era of civil war; the lesson from England was well learnt."

Concretely, it meant first punishment and debasement of Germany. Germany was considered guilty and should therefore be submitted to the payment of "war guilt reparations" taking into account "damage done to property and humans" and "pensions to war orphans and war widows." Needless to say, the reparations clauses ignored Germany's obligation to meet the needs of its own population, and the inability of the postwar German governments to pay constantly fed "eagerness for revenge." Furthermore, the economic clauses of the treaty wrecked Germany and German firms on a world scale.

Second, Europe was geopolitically divided in such a way that nations were pitted against each other, and held in check through a balance of power based on "permanent French-German opposition." Therefore, World War II was embedded in the peace treaty of World War I. France not only got back Alsace-Lorraine—which was fair, considering that Germany had gotten it through the war of 1870—but was also given the administration of the Saarland coal mines, Saarland itself being submitted to 15 years of League of Nations control. The League of Nations was created as a league of victors, without Germany. All German colonies were taken over by the League of Nations administration, and the British were granted de facto control of the seas. The

Allies were granted the occupation of the left bank of the Rhine for 15 years, with an evacuation of one-third of their forces pledged every five years, as long as Germany met the schedule for payment of its war reparations on time! The German Army was reduced in principle to 100,000 men, without aviation and heavy artillery. Poland was carved out at the expense of Austro-Hungary and Germany (see **Figures 1, 2, and 3**).

The Austro-Hungarian Empire was destroyed, and while we are not going to follow today's new geopolitical fashion and shed tears over its fate as an empire, we have to stress that not only was it brutally divided without taking into account the will of its people, but it was replaced by a combination of synthetic nations. All were given a poisoned pill in their very cradle: Yugoslavia was made of Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats and Slovenes, with Hungarian and Muslim minorities, and Czechoslovakia was divided into Czechs, Slovaks, and a significant German minority in the Sudetenland. Any German-Austrian unification was explicitly forbidden by the law of the victors. All these arrangements were deliberate provocations, creating the conditions for a conflict to be unsolvable among nations, and demanding "control from above." In that sense, more than the order of Vienna, the order of Versailles is the first financial-geopolitical supranational order, based on an everlasting civil war held in check by the League of Nations, as an appendage of London and Washington.

Third, the "peace" was arranged to prevent "the occurrence of any Prussian-Russian alliance." In a word, the Anglo-American design was, and is, never to allow peace to prevail among France, Germany, and Russia. Germany and Russia should be kept from establishing bilateral relations outside the control of London and Washington: As early as March 28, 1919, the still young Herbert Hoover writes to the aging Wilson: "If the militant features of Bolshevism were drawn in colors with their true parallel with Prussianism as an attempt at world domination that we do not stand for, it would check the fears that today haunt all men's minds." To avoid this, the Anglo-Americans decided to play both sides, and control them through the "new weapons": capital, food, and economic aid. As for Russia, the Americans considered that "Bolshevism can be cured and used cleverly." "Military truce combined with economic aid is bound to redirect the revolutionary currents into reformist channels in Russia"—in other words, create the conditions for a more efficient looting by the American firms located, for example, at 120 Broadway, in New York, with the Hammers and the Schiffs acting as middlemen. Britain's Lloyd George expresses the same more bluntly: "We must call in the Soviets and talk to them as Rome used to do with barbarian tribes."

As for Germany, Wilson's design was to "bring the social reform forces [such as the Social Democrats, the Progressives, and the Christian Democratic Center], through a democratic revolution, into an alliance with London and Washing-

ton." The William C. Bullitt papers indicate to us why: "In spite of the developments of the Russian Revolution, the moderates have clung to their creed that Germany can only find salvation in democratic development and understanding with England and the United States." Bullitt adds more bluntly: "They consider Russia, not England, the irreconcilable enemy of Germany."

It is therefore clear that the Versailles order meant European vassalage under Anglo-American rule, the victors being treated ultimately no better than the losers on the continent.

The axioms of the Versailles order

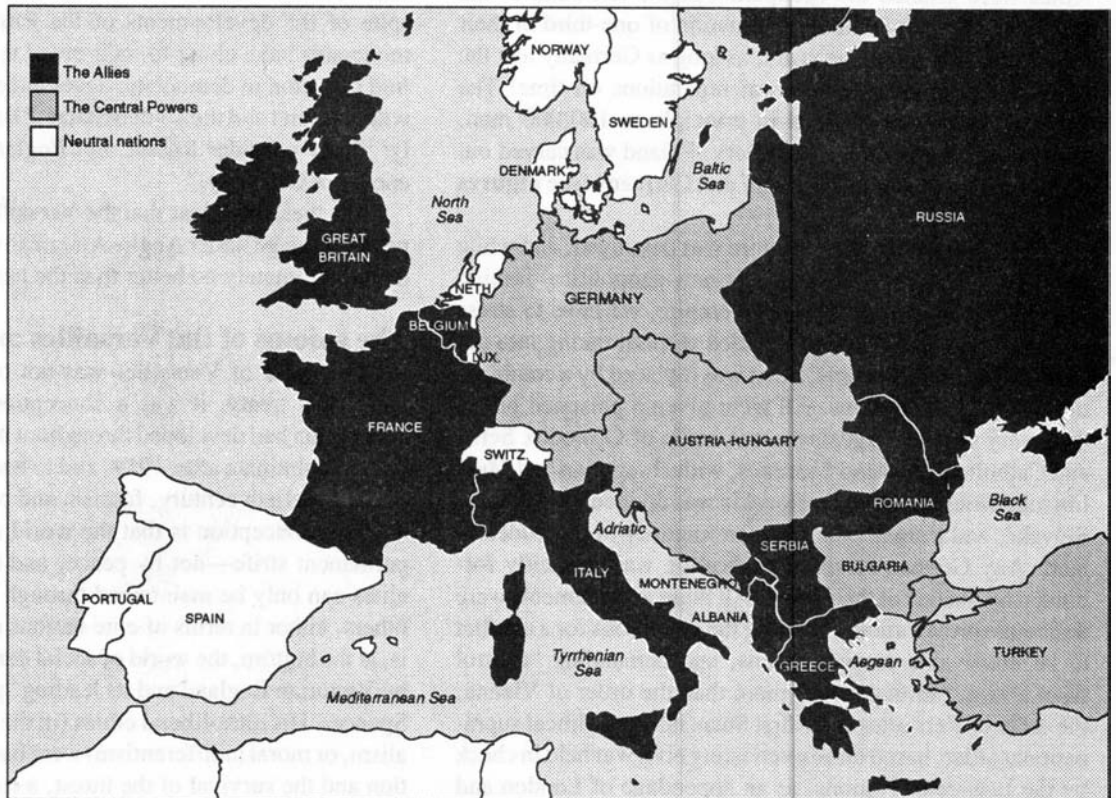
The order of Versailles was not only the cold-blooded letter of a treaty, it was a conception of the world. This conception had developed throughout the nineteenth century, only to culminate after 1919, and to lead to the two monsters of the twentieth century, fascism and communism.

This conception is that the world is ruled by conflict—permanent strife—not by peace, and that the power of the elites can only be maintained through the oppression of the others, either in terms of elite nations or elite individuals. It is, at the bottom, the world of social darwinism, as conceived by Victorian England and its leading "philosopher," Herbert Spencer. His ultra-liberal ethics (in the sense of British liberalism, or moral indifferentism) were based on social competition and the survival of the fittest, a conception that the war in the trenches of World War I made extremely popular. In Germany, it took the form of the "Great Germany" and eugenics of Ernst Haeckel, and in France the neo-Nietzschean conception of a Georges Sorel—regeneration through strife and violence—or the cult of "sacrifice to the blood and soil" of a Charles Péguy at the end of his life. This set the terms, and in that sense the ultra-liberal Darwinian world view was and is the ground on which fascism (race struggle) and communism (class struggle) both grew. Before they grew up fully, the sense of doom with which the people went to war in all European countries came from the popularization of that British-originated world view.

This has to be stressed to understand the three heads of the monster. *Socially*, it is malthusianism: Only the fittest and the best species survive. *Economically*, it is usury: Money goes for rent (the world of 1913, like the world of 1992, was a world of rentiers, with very high interest rates), and not for production and the development of the human mind. *Scientifically*, it is entropy: a dual universe where creation is infinite but unmeasurable ("spiritual"), and technology is measurable ("useful") but linear, deductive. Therefore the universe on which man can act upon is necessarily doomed to an end, the management of the permanent crisis having to be controlled by a ruling elite which is lucid, pessimistic, and enjoying the pleasures of impotent meditation.

In a word, such a world has a smell of death, and Versailles is the result of that smell, which infected the trenches and butcheries of World War I.

FIGURE 1
Europe at the
outbreak of
World War I



How Versailles could be sold

How could such an infamous order be accepted by human beings? A beginning of an answer is given by the famous saying that, psychologically, Adolf Hitler was born in the trenches of World War I. Rarely were human beings subjected to such mistreatment and degradation as the soldiers of those days. Bombarded day and night (the noise of the cannons, like volcanoes, never stopped during more than four years on the battle front), often half-abandoned and unfed, subject to epidemics and “triated” if wounded, and sent into “offensives” that were meaningless in most cases, and which killed between one-fourth and one-half of them, the soldiers generated a sense of pessimism and despair convenient to the thinking of the degenerated elites.

World War I was the first in history where all countries involved gave weapons to all their young men to kill each other at random; it was the first butchery to which all were compelled to go. It was the first time in history also where such a density of means to kill was produced. French and German industries were totally geared for war, France, for example, having produced in those four years 300 million shells, 6.3 billion cartridges, and 51,000 airplanes. To this unprecedented mass killing corresponded a mass brainwashing: War censorship was established in all countries, and nothing could be written in the trenches. The strategy of the

French and German general staffs was to bleed each other *in infinitum*, and the Allies finally “won,” only because of the arrival of fresh American troops. For example, in the two-week offensive of the Chemin des Dames, France lost 147,000 men, and at Verdun, France and Germany lost together 770,000 men (killed or severely wounded) in 302 days.

By the end of the war, about 1.5 million had been killed, 34 dead out of every 1,000 inhabitants, the figure being 30 per 1,000 in Germany and 21 in England. More than 25% of French men between ages 18 and 27 were killed, 14% were permanently disabled, and about 40% were wounded! In France, where the war took place, 350,000 houses were destroyed, 62,000 kilometers of roads, 5,000 kilometers of railroads, and 1,900 kilometers of waterways were lost, and more than 2.5 million hectares of farmland were burnt.

The financial cost of the war was enormous. In France, the war expenses reached 120 billion gold francs, of which 30 to 35 billion were never paid and 9 billion were received from Germany in reparations. This meant that 80 billion gold francs were thrown into the war Moloch, in a country where the national budget barely reached 5 billion francs before the war. Therefore, the war consumed, in only four years, 16 years of budget!

The financier and the war speculator (as shown, for exam-

FIGURE 2
Europe after
the Versailles
Treaty

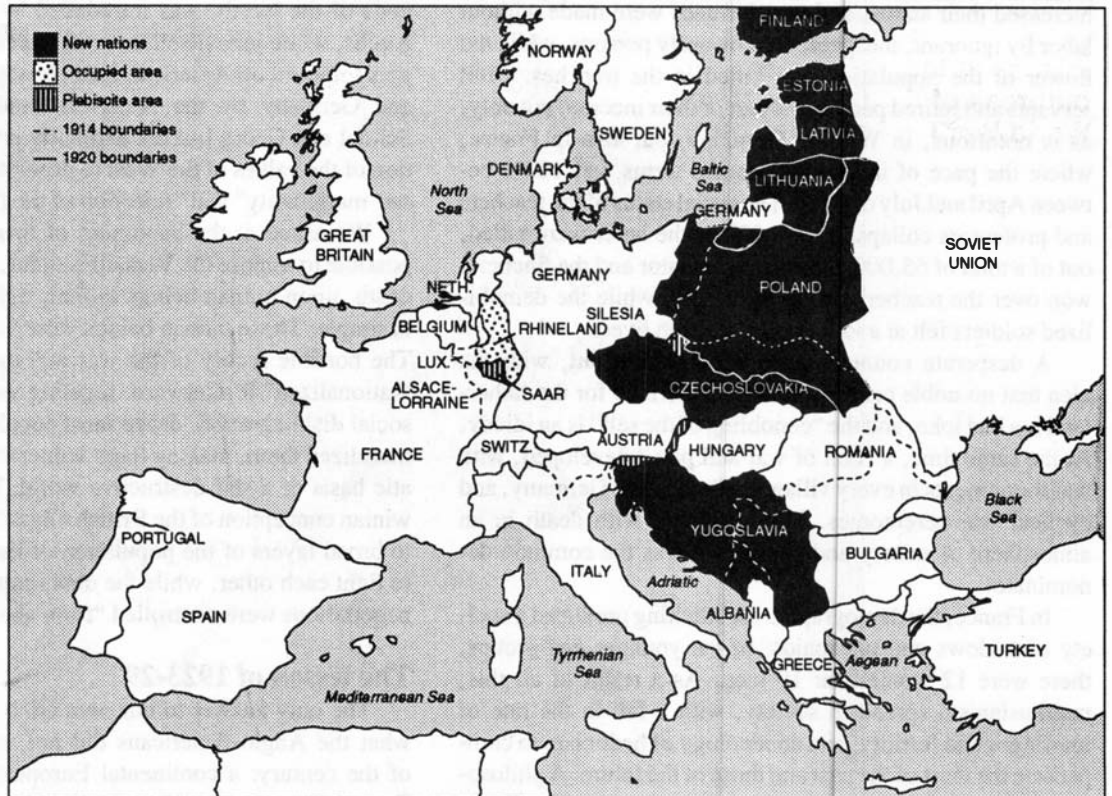


FIGURE 3
Europe after
Jan. 15, 1992*



*As of this writing, major map companies have not produced a map of Europe reflecting the existence of new countries since the breakup of the Soviet Union in December and the European Community recognition of Croatia and Slovenia on Jan. 15, 1992. This map is intended to reflect the political changes and cannot be an accurate representation of new boundaries.

ple, in the paintings of the German satirical artist Grosz) increased their status, and vast fortunes were made without labor by ignorant, incapable, or cowardly persons, while the flower of the population was killed in the trenches. Civil servants and retired people lost part of their income, not only, as is notorious, in Weimar Germany, but also in France, where the pace of inflation in annual terms was 100% between April and July of 1917. The social status of the teachers and professors collapsed, as 6,000 of the latter were killed, out of a total of 65,000. The war speculator and the financier won over the teacher and the professor, while the demobilized soldiers felt at a loss in their civilian lives.

A desperate counterculture became rampant, with the idea that no noble cause is possible, sacrifice for the fatherland is a bad joke, and the “ennobling of the self” is an idiocy. At the same time, a “cult of war and pain” developed, with war monuments in every village of France and Germany, and cyclical war ceremonies. The obsession with death in an atmosphere of misery and pessimism was the common denominator.

In France, the demographic bloodletting produced a society of widows and old maids: In the younger age groups, there were 12 women for 10 men. As a result of all this, malthusianism spread in society, with a fall in the rate of marriages and fertility, and an ideology of hedonism to compensate the fears of the past and those of the future. A philosopher like Henri Bergson started saying that over-fertility is the cause of wars, and the League of Nations should put mandatory birth controls on those countries enjoying too high a population growth! In Germany, there was the sense of betrayal: The war was lost without having been fought on the national territory, and for the elites, “Wilson’s democracy served no other purpose than to spread an idealistic veneer over a predatory treaty.” The war veterans were enraged, and the “Republic,” the “Weimar Republic,” was from the outset seen as the product of injustice and vassalage.

Over the ruins of human thinking and hope grew a pagan, anti-Christian world view, accusing Christianity of being the religion of the weak and the cheated, as “we Germans were cheated.” Ernst Juenger wrote of his “worker,” and with others promoted the conception of a “soldier-worker” born in the trenches to “regenerate the nation” through labor and violence. The “soldier” was promoted as the “only example of morality,” while fringe but influential groups in the oligarchy, like the Thule Society, celebrated the Wagnerian gods of the North against the Christian God.

Counterculture spread through all Europe, with two seemingly opposed faces that had in common the fact that they were implicitly or explicitly based on the commitment to destroy Judeo-Christian values. On one side was the cult of strength and the race, which culminated with Nazism, when the economy collapsed. On the other, it was a hedonistic, anti-authoritarian destruction of all values, first expressed in Switzerland during the war itself with “Dadaism,” leading

to surrealism. Russian ballet music, celebrating the pagan gods of the North, was introduced by emigré Russian oligarchs, while jazz (itself an artificial creation of French origins imposed on American blacks) was brought into France and Germany by the American soldiers. The Frankfurt School and Georg Lukacs explicitly promoted the “destruction of the values of the West to promote new values,” based on “marginality” and “rejection of the father image.”

We asked at the beginning of this article: How was it possible to impose the Versailles order, an order of strife and death, upon human beings in their right mind? The answer is simple: Those human beings were not in their right mind! The horrible reality of the war and the counterculture that “rationalized” it afterward, together with the economic and social disintegration, drove most people sick or mad, or demoralized them, making them vulnerable to the very axiomatic basis of a self-destructive world. The Spencerian-Darwinian conception of the British oligarchical elite had spread to broad layers of the population of Europe, dooming them to fight each other, while the debt, culture, and geopolitical negotiations were controlled “from above.”

The lesson of 1923-29

The only answer to our own crisis today is, politically, what the Anglo-Americans did not want at the beginning of the century: a continental European alliance, involving France, Germany, and Russia, based on peace through mutual economic development. But the failure of the Russian-German and French-German alliances during the 1920s shows that mere political intention is not enough. Let’s take the case of the French-German alliance conceived in the 1926-29 period.

The system of debt payment, under the Dawes Plan of April 1921, for example, was to have France and England pay their war debt to the Anglo-American banks, while France and England tried to get the most they could from Germany—especially France, which was much more heavily indebted than England, because it had borne the brunt of the war and did not enjoy such privileged relations to Washington. Permanent negotiations took place on the quantity of bonds to be issued on payment, on the pace of issuance, and on relations between debtors and creditors.

France tried first to bleed Germany as much as possible: hence the occupation of the Ruhr by Prime Minister Henri Poincaré on Jan. 11, 1923. The goal was to take over German coal and iron if Germany could not pay in cash, and to grab German positions in foreign markets. The British mocked the action as the *imperialisme du pauvre*—imperialism of the poor—but started to dislike it when France became too insistent, when the French had occupied sensitive positions in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, and taken over the 25% German share in Turkish petroleum. The Anglo-Americans started to put the weak franc under pressure, and the French currency heavily collapsed between the last eight

months of 1923 and March 1924.

In October 1923, Poincaré had to withdraw his troops from the Ruhr and accept on March 1924 a severe austerity plan. By a set of mandatory government decrees, he cut public expenses by 1 billion francs and increased direct taxes by 20%! Against this, the Bank of England lent France £4 million and J.P. Morgan lent \$100 million, "just for the Treasury."

Poincaré and the French elites had then understood that the real master in the world was not the French Army, "which had won the war and shed more blood than all others," but the British and American banks. It is then that their policy shifted, and they decided to "achieve not only an alliance of the weak with Germany, but national reconciliation." This yielded first the "spirit of Locarno," the Briand-Stresemann appeasement policy, and on Sept. 4, 1926, Germany was admitted into the League of Nations. But what is beneath the surface is far more interesting.

France softened her obsession with "guilt reparations," Germany backed French industries, and a trade treaty was signed in August 1927. A steel agreement was signed on a continental basis, and psychological détente followed the economic arrangements: A French-German Committee for documentation and information was created, to drop the idea of "absolute German responsibility in the war" and reestablish "the historical truth."

More interestingly, a project emerged for a "European Zollverein" (after the name of Friedrich List's customs union among the German states in the 1830s), with explicit references to List and Paul Cauwes, the French economist who was an enemy of free trade and of the "British system" at the end of the nineteenth century. French economist Charles Gide and political leader Yves Le Trocquer created a Union Economique et Douanière (Economic and Customs Union) to promote that idea.

This was now a real threat to London and Washington: A German-French alliance was in the works, based on industrial and infrastructural development, in potential combination with Russia, while the British responsibilities in World War I threatened to be established by the common French and German historical work. Yet the French-German alliance did not work. The lessons of that failure are very relevant today.

First, the French authorities did want an agreement with Germany, but without confronting London and Washington, while the German Social Democrats and Christian Democrats were also reluctant to face the Anglo-Americans head-on. Briand and Poincaré, in France, vacillated between a deliberate policy of continental alliance, or gaining an instrument of pressure over England. A genuine promoter of the Franco-German alliance writes: "The advocates of a continental bloc were too often nothing but frustrated Atlanticists."

Second, partially as a result of such indecisiveness, the command of the alliance policy was left to "field operators," such as industrialists or thinkers, and had no political brain.

The French population, in particular, was not organized for such an alliance, and the alliance remained a matter reserved to the elites.

Third, and most important, the axioms of the Versailles order were not frontally attacked, and the alliance was seen more as an improvement of such an order than as its reversal. Economically and culturally, the French-German alliance was therefore unable to take off, as opposed to the de Gaulle-Adenauer entente after World War II, which did confront the Anglo-American order and its prejudices and cultural outlook.

Disaster started when the French government, instead of going for a break of the two newly allied nations from London and Washington, tried instead to "contain" Germany, within a set of international economic and political agreements, notably within a "European Federation." The dynamics of the process were then blocked, as they are today in 1992, and for a similar reason. The alliance finally collapse into the chaos spread by the Wall Street crash of 1929, when for lack of common goals and policies, Paris and Berlin went on an "every man for himself" rampage.

From Versailles to our times

The first point to be made on the Versailles order is that it was a failure from the start. We should not overestimate Versailles as a grand scheme to control the twentieth century; it was a social, economic, and political failure, of which the spread of Stalinism, fascism, social democratic corporatism, and unchecked free trade are the products. Versailles is a permanent collapse, an attempt to avoid a Krakatoa volcanic explosion through the organization of a permanent mudslide, a dream to control disintegration leading to the nightmare of chaos plunging everybody in the mud.

The second point is that such an order is finished; it led to disaster and cannot be mended. The only question left, is what comes after.

Third, it has to be emphasized that in the Versailles period, Europe was in a revolutionary situation. That's indeed why the peace treaty was signed in the first place: to try to check the revolutionary process. It only succeeded because the leadership of the revolution was misguided by the same prejudices and axioms as those embedded in the peace treaty itself. The ennobling of the human condition and the improvement of what Friedrich Schiller and Charles de Gaulle called "character," the capacity of the human soul to naturally lean toward the common good, was on nobody's agenda. What followed was our century of continuing mass murders, concentration camps, and holocausts.

Today, let's stress it again, the order of Versailles has reached its end. But "naturally," without subjective intervention and change, what is coming next will lead to chaos and death, as the present situation both in the Third World and eastern Europe exemplifies. Are we willing to meet the challenge, to reverse the Anglo-American, Aristotelian axioms of the twentieth century?