BOOK REVIEW


In European history, peace was something that was made possible by the spirit of compromise that followed major wars, and actuated by settlements, which engineered it. The quality and duration of peace depended on the nature of its construction. In Conquering Peace, Stella Ghervas, a Swiss historian of Russia teaching in the United Kingdom, treats modern European history as “an experimental laboratory for trying out several theories of peace” (p. 372). Although the outcome of this undertaking is unquestionably a work of history rather than social science, Ghervas has sought to go beyond “history for history’s sake” in an effort to understand peace as a phenomenon, with lessons for contemporary strategists and leaders.

Peace in Europe is centered around a handful of dates: 1648, 1713, 1815, 1945, and 1989. Ghervas takes a traditional approach, providing a narrative explanation of the conflicts that preceded these moments in history, an explanation of the settlement which followed, and an assessment of the robustness of the peace as time passed. She supplements this approach by bringing concurrent philosophical explorations of peace into the discussion, with abbé de Saint-Pierre (1658–1743), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Klemens von Metternich (1773–1859), and Robert Schuman (1886–1963) featuring prominently.

In many ways, Conquering Peace is an updated restatement of Andreas Osiander’s book The States System of Europe, 1640–1990: Peacemaking and the Conditions of International Stability (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Although it would unquestionably be mistaken to dismiss Ghervas’ book as redundant, it does seem somewhat disingenuous to merely footnote Osiander’s book in passing. He concluded that the degree of stability (i.e., peace) present in a system was dependent on “the degree of consensus present in the system” (Osiander, p. 5). Osiander had traced the development of state autonomy (as opposed to universal monarchy or papal rule) to the settlements of 1648, the balance of power principle (and reality) to Utrecht in 1713, and great-power political and territorial equilibrium to the Vienna settlement of 1815. The Versailles Peace of 1919, in contrast, was simply imposed—despite Woodrow Wilson’s rhetorical nods to consensus—and along with the disruptions of “self-determination,” generated the “historical logic” of the Second World War (p. 314). In 1945, Osiander saw the restoration of the great-power principle, with both the United States and Soviet Union benefiting from the distribution of the world into armed camps. Then finally, after 1989, in Europe the “reign of law” developed as a legitimating principle, while the situation elsewhere was more ambiguous.
Ghervas’ book accepts this metanarrative while adding important nuances. Peace could not last after 1713 because territorial disputes had not been resolved, as the abbé de Saint-Pierre was to observe at the time (Ghervas, p. 52 ff.). She argues that Tsar Alexander I (1777–1825) was a statesman of Wilsonian vision, with the difference that he could actually secure his objectives practically. Alexander’s much-maligned Holy Alliance is in this telling an ingenious way to align Europe nonconfessionally by bringing Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox together in solidarity (pp. 110–116). And in the nineteenth century, peace gradually broke down because the political alignments conspired to prevent domestic political evolution, which provoked the alternative: revolution (pp. 124–127; 143–147). As for the Peace of Versailles, she concurs that the “Peace” part of this name “is a misnomer” (p. 151), not only because there was little consensus, but also because the body that was to maintain the peace—the League of Nations—excluded three of the most important states: the United States, the Soviet Union, and Germany. Strangely, after explicitly and implicitly critiquing the (non–)Peace of Versailles along these lines, Ghervas dismisses “whether things could have gone differently” as a question “belonging to counterfactual history” (p. 210). If a car crashed because an engineer designed critical components in a defective manner, it would be preposterous to say that whether he or she could have done otherwise is an uninteresting counterfactual. Failure, and not just success, offers important lessons, and there is no good reason to project an aura of inevitability on the past.

The rest of the book focuses on the years after the Second World War. Once again, statesmen sought to engineer an organization—the United Nations—that would allow humanity to overcome the scourge of war, and once again ideals did not match with reality. In Europe, where Franco-German reconciliation remained the principal challenge, a different model was tried: that of the “multicellular organism.” In the words of the French foreign minister in 1950: “Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity” (p. 254). Ghervas admirably tells the story of how peace in modern Europe was slowly constructed on such a model, through “cellular division and aggregation” (p. 256) rather than a single comprehensive postwar engineering plan. With the end of the Cold War, she convincingly portrays Gorbachev as a peacemaker equivalent to Alexander I.

In the end, Ghervas concludes that “the mindset of war uses force and deception to compel another party to do one’s bidding. The mindset of peace uses dialogue and mutual trust to convince the other party of the legitimacy of one’s policies and goals” (p. 355). The Franco-German change in mindset that began in 1950 (p. 372) is indeed an example of such a mindset or spirit of peace, as opposed to war, though a purely Constructivist interpretation is open to the critique that it
was the American deployment of forces in Europe that objectively changed security conditions, allowing new subjective mindsets to emerge.

How can political leaders engender a peace mindset today? This question is left unanswered by the book, though the fact that peace settlements have followed highly destructive wars in European history offers a hint. My answer is that what Machiavelli understood of changes in law and organization domestically also applies internationally. He wrote that cities, “will never reorganize themselves without risk, for most men will never agree to a new law that concerns a new order in a city unless a certain necessity shows them it is required, and since this necessity cannot arise without risk, it is an easy thing for that republic to be ruined before it can be brought to perfection in its organization (Discourses on Livy, bk. 1, cp. 2).”

In the last five hundred years of European history, the necessity for peace (and the mindset it involves) has only been recognized atop the ruins of war. In times of relative peace, the risks of war feel subjectively distant and few. Safety standards and seatbelts resulted from repeated car crashes and death. The question for international politics remains: whether the crashes of the past will suffice to necessitate new standards or whether contemporary states will need themselves to crash first. The reader may judge which is more likely, given humankind’s record of learning from history.

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