

Review: *Conquering Peace from the Enlightenment to the European Union* By Stella Ghervas. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2021, 513pp. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0-674097526-2

This is a big book, a long read that aims at answering a big question: ‘how is it possible to prevent future wars while guaranteeing the liberties of all states?’ (p. 4). The question itself is not particularly historical, although Ghervas aims to answer it by narrating the long history of diplomatic and political cooperation between the European states since the eighteenth century. She posits that the road to ‘political solidarity’ as evinced by the European Union’s multi-cellular and institutional form and commitment to solving inter-state issues through legal and cooperative forums is the product of many centuries of elite political engagement. This, then, is a history of the idea of peace as a cooperative model of diplomacy in the European context. The book argues that since the Treaty of Utrecht (1712), Europe’s governing elites have either considered, toyed with or struggled to implement some version of European solidarity, aiming ultimately at mitigating the likelihood of warfare breaking out between the various European nations. Ghervas is at pains to stress that this history is not a history of continuities and that, at best, the ambition to achieve ‘lasting peace’ in Europe was a ‘tenuous “constant”’ (p. 349) across a period of time where so much changed in the political, economic, cultural, social and economic landscape of this war-riddled continent.

In many ways, *Conquering Peace* offers a new instalment to the long historiographical tradition of trying to explain the rise and fall of intra-European systems of diplomatic stability (or instability as the case might be). Like many earlier works, Ghervas too fixates on the ‘great’ moments of peacemaking – at Utrecht in the wake of the Thirty Years’ War (1712), at Vienna (1814-1815) in the dying moments of the Napoleonic era, at Versailles as much of Europe crashed and burned at the end of the First World War, and in the wake of the devastation wreaked by the Second World War. Where previous histories often concern themselves with explaining the ‘successes’ and ‘failures’ of these peace moments (along the lines of Paul Schroeder’s claim that the Congress of Vienna was the most successful peace treaty of all time), Ghervas explains how the various peacemakers tried to implement a new version of European stability. She ascribes these moments of post-war reconstruction with a ‘spirit’, and highlights how this ‘spirit’ of peace affected the course of European diplomacy going forward.

Where the book is at its best is in describing the multiplicity of ideas that abounded in these moments of peace-making, and in explaining how particular versions of those ideas came to dominate elite European discourses. Ghervas writes evocatively and really brings to life the personalities and ideas at play in the European diplomatic world in 1712, 1815, 1919 and post-1945.

Where I really struggled with the book, however, was in its attempt to do so much more than explain the variegated versions of cooperative politics at play among a European elite. I am not clear how her big question – how is it possible to prevent future wars while guaranteeing the liberties of all states? – can be answered from these particular case studies. In the end, I am not sure Ghervas found a satisfactory answer, making this more of an interrogative study than an explanatory one.

At times, the book argues that pragmatism and the avoidance of seismic change sits at the heart of successful peace diplomacy. Yet the book's case studies are not about the functioning of cooperative policies and normative frameworks: there is no history of the rise of European legal norms as a way of avoiding war after 1856, for example, or of the role played by small states in brokering the diplomacy between the great powers. Rather this is a history of the process of reframing and reconstructing the relationships that existed between rival powers precisely at a time when they had endured enormous seismic change. In other words, what the reworking of peace in 1712, 1815, 1919 and post-1945 all had in common was that some new version of the relationship between the European states had to be designed, as there was no going back to the previous models. Too much seismic change had occurred.

At other times, Ghervas attempts to answer the big question by arguing that hegemonic empires fail at peace-making because hegemonic ambition is *prima facie* counter-productive to peace engineering. Yet this flies in the face of Ghervas's own history, namely that successful peace systems in Europe enabled Europe's elites to export their norms and expand their power into the world, creating new hegemonic realities in the process, which so many outside Europe saw and continue to see not as 'peace-able' but as coercive and imperial. As such, the book's basic claim that the 'strong' make peace, while the 'weak' make war is difficult to sustain. For while Ghervas's history shows how the states that survived the wars and great seismic changes of their time (the 'strong') created systemic frameworks that aimed at protecting their collective power going forward, it does not follow that peace made by the strong aided (or aids) the weak.

I applaud Ghervas for being deeply ambitious in constructing this history. The book does so much more than narrate a history of a complex idea – the idea of peace – as it functioned across time in a particularly crisis-ridden part of the world (Europe). It highlights how elusive and multidimensional the search for peace and the ambition of war avoidance was and remains among the European powers. It does not shy away from asking complex questions, nor from attempting to answer them. While I did not find many of the book's core interpretative assertions convincing, it has succeeded in making me rethink and requestion my own interpretations of how international systems sustain regimes of stability and who benefits from them.

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