The Kellogg-Briand Pact: A Failed Attempt

The Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 made war illegal for the undersigned countries, which included most countries involved in World War I. The Second World War began less than a decade later. How could countries so recently dedicated to abolishing war have so soon forgotten, or ignored, this promise? Upon first reading the Kellogg-Briand Pact I was shocked by its brevity. The one page of the document consists largely of titles explaining the authority of the signing heads of state. Thus, the question is not why did these countries turn their back on this pact but rather how did they ever expect it to work? The development of a lesson plan for high school history students, or even college and graduate level peace and conflict resolution students, could be developed from the analysis of the following shortcomings.

The first of these shortcomings concerns those who signed and formed the document. Transitory heads of state signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact with presumably no consultation to the people living in these nations. Many of the signatories of the pact were monarchs and all were rather removed from the common people of their nations. According to Karen Eppler, Cesar Chavez said it is of the most acute importance to the success of any nonviolent effort that leaders not exploit the working class (364). The leaders of these nations agreed to end war without consulting the people who fought the wars on behalf of these same leaders and their policies. The Good Friday, or Belfast, Agreement signed in 1998 and often considered the official end to the prolonged conflict in N. Ireland, known as The Troubles, provides an example of Chavez’s insightful statement. It was not merely signed by heads of state; the people also voted on the treaty. It should be acknowledged that the Good Friday Agreement is problematic in many ways. The provisions of this in part people-dictated treaty placed ex-paramilitary leaders in power, leading diplomatic stalemates as those men engaged in violent conflict during The Troubles moved their disagreements to the political realm. However, even with its problems, unlike the non-participatory Kellogg-Briand Pact the Good Friday Agreement has dramatically decreased violence in N. Ireland.

The Kellogg-Briand Pact also sought to abolish war without attempting to alleviate human rights issues within undersigned countries. To call for an end of violence on an international scale it only seems fitting that the countries would also handle structural violence within their own societal and political systems. The Kellogg-Briand Pact sought to eradicate war without changing structures in their own countries supporting violence, which were, to an extent, the same structures supporting oppression of certain people groups. There was little truthful representation of conditions in some of the countries defeated in WWI, such as Germany, whose devastated economy due to reparations paid to France and G. Britain in part allowed Hitler to rise to power. The Kellogg-Briand Pact was too brief and nothing more than a superficial promise that did not fix infrastructure conditions to make war less likely.

The brevity of the Kellogg-Briand Pact led to its downfall. It claimed to call for the eradication of war; however, it never defined war. Because the treaty lacked a comprehensible and internationally understood definition of war, this, in addition to other factors, allowed for undersigned countries to participate in World War II. Secretary of State Cordell Hull, who served as US Secretary of State for all of WWII, did not interpret the inclusion of *all* of the undersigned countries involvement in the Second World War as a violation of the pact. Some countries were exempt from blame because the language of the treaty ambiguously allowed for self defense. In Hull’s “mind the shoe was on the other foot . . . the countries entitled to invoke the doctrine of self-defense as excuses for their conduct were not the invaders” (Hyde 118). The war was begun by Japan and Italy, both countries that were a part of the pact. Thus, we can assume that some of the countries did not take the pact seriously from the beginning. Even among those given the benefit of the doubt, that is those that it can be gratuitously assumed had taken it seriously, interpreted their actions as defensive—arming themselves in an unstable world. As the treaty included no section for how to properly handle aggression, how could war not have been expected to break out eventually?

To call for the reinstatement of a failed treaty is foolish. Instead, examining why the Kellogg-Briand Pact failed and attempting to draw up a more successful treaty in the future would more likely ensure future peace. I would argue that, if not entirely, the Kellogg-Briand Pact was largely an effort on the part of the superpowers of the world alleviate any ill will and fears following World War I. Regardless of the intentions behind the pact, its failures and shortcomings cannot and should not be ignored. Instead of feeling an overwhelming and ill-placed sense of disappointment because the Kellogg-Briand Pact failed, we ought to examine its shortcomings and learn from its mistakes when creating future treaties and pacts.

Works Cited

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