**Today is the 1st January 2019 and over this period in history 100 years ago occurred the following events**…Happy New Year everyone, I hope you can look back on 2018 as a good year, and that you’re ready to see what 2019 holds for you and your loved ones. Make sure these loved ones know that these next few months will be times of busy listening for you, as we get into perhaps the most dense period of podcasting I’ve ever had, and launch our DG in a few short weeks as well. We start the new year off with a bang, as we detail WW’s tour of Italy. Technically speaking, these events occurred over the space of 1-6 January 1919, but tying them altogether in a neat bundle will serve us well for the future, as January was an active month as far as months go, and there’s no need to complicate things unnecessarily by dragging the Italian tour out, so here we are. We last saw WW on St Stephen’s Day or Boxing Day to my British listeners, and he was doing a very British thing indeed – visiting London. Before Britain was selected as a destination though, Italy had long been on the to do list, and once he left DLG to his own devices on 30th December, the President made his way towards the final stop off before the PPC could open. Arguably the less important pillar of the allied structure, Italy still could not be ignored; her intervention in the war had come at a critical time, and WW would have to meet with her leaders to assure them that such intervention would be rewarded…just not in the way that they had hoped…

WW’s travels would end once he returned from Italy on 6th January, and by then, the real work would be set to begin. However, in the meantime, the intrigue and activism did not stop in Paris simply because the President was absent. Edward House, to the surprise of no one, took up the President’s duties while Wilson was absent, and it was while Wilson moved from London, to Paris and then to Rome over late December and early January, that a change was affected which was to have profound implications for the PPC. On the same day that Wilson made a speech in London enthusiastically defending his vision of a new world order and the LON, GC was making a speech of his own to the Chamber of Deputies, wherein he mounted what must have seemed like an unexpected challenge to the American stance to those that did not know Clemenceau any better. ‘There is an old system of alliances’, Clemenceau boomed, ‘call the Balance of Power – this system of alliances, which I do not renounce, will be my guiding thought at the Peace Conference.’

This was not a 180 in French policy, as House and Wilson may have imagined, instead it was Clemenceau’s political side manifesting itself, to loud cheers among his peers in the Chamber of Deputies. Clemenceau believed to a degree in the League; he approved of it as a device to keep the peace, but he did not imagine that overnight, this new institution could fundamentally alter European or world behaviour, and this speech was a declaration of this idea, which, as it transpired, was closer to the truth than Wilson liked to admit. Perhaps out of frustration as well, Clemenceau remarked on Wilson’s *candeur*, a French word which could mean either candour or political naivety. This double meaning was a deliberate ploy, but it was not the aggressive, bitter act of a Frenchman in possession of a narrow-minded mission which forced him to spurn everything else, as is sometimes assumed. We must emphasise again that Clemenceau and Wilson had been through very different lifetimes by the time they met up; it was inevitable that they should have very different views on how the world worked. ‘Please do not misunderstand me’, Clemenceau would later clarify to Wilson:

We too came into this world with the noble instincts and with the lofty aspirations which you express so often and so eloquently. We have become what we are because we have been shaped by the rough hand of the world in which we have to live, and we have survived only because we are a tough bunch.

This was a far more measured approach to Wilson’s dogma than is often presented, but it did not matter, because Clemenceau’s speech on 28th December had the effect of turning House and subsequently Wilson against him.[[1]](#footnote-1) By this act, Clemenceau certainly erred, and combined with Wilson’s successful identification with the eager DLG, the French premier found that his next audience with the President was a good deal less warm. House wrote in his diary on 31st December that Wilson ‘was disturbed over Clemenceau's speech in the Chamber’ and added that:

I took occasion to tell him that in my opinion we would have to work with England rather than with France if we hoped to get the things for which we were striving through. He [Wilson] needed some persuasion before he agreed with me, but finally did so. I am to take lunch with him tomorrow and have a more general talk.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Just like that, it seemed, House had abandoned his old policy of cosying up with the French at Britain’s expense. The French premier’s public repudiation of the American vision, House believed, was a step too far, and a regrettable political ploy at a time when allied support of the League of Nations was a sticking point. DLG, whatever he may have really felt about the utility of the League, refrained from making his cynicism public so long as America’s good graces were on his wish list. It appeared that Clemenceau was not this politically perceptive, but the French premier was also unwilling to kowtow to the American President simply because he desired his support. French interests would have to be preserved and fought for, and this included the maintenance of the alliance system which defended France from German attack. Clemenceau knew the mood of his peers, and was mindful of the fact that while Frenchmen longed for peace and desired to start fresh, the realities of France’s strategic situation and her political legacy meant that making a clean break with the past was not nearly so simple as Wilson imagined. That neither House nor Wilson were appreciative of the French situation is demonstrated by House’s breath-taking about face towards the French, expressed most plainly in a diary entry on 1st January, as Wilson stopped off in Paris before making his way towards Italy. House said:

I took lunch with the President and we discussed many matters of importance. He is rather full of his trip to England and seems to have had a thoroughly satisfactory time…It is the general opinion that the banquet at Buckingham Palace was the most elaborate effort that any of those attending had ever witnessed. The President told in much detail of his conversation with Lloyd George, Balfour, Bonar Law and others, and we discussed Clemenceau's speech in the Chamber of Deputies. In my opinion, it is the greatest blunder that Clemenceau has made…it may cost France many millions that she might otherwise have had from us. After I read the speech I became convinced that the United States and England should get together closely and work to a common program in this Peace Conference rather than to depend upon France. In accordance with this thought I went a long way with Balfour yesterday and I think I convinced the President this morning that it was the proper policy for us to pursue. Such blunders make me glad that I am not given to public speaking. It is a pleasant but dangerous pastime.[[3]](#footnote-3)

House was content to hold the fort while Wilson journeyed to Italy, but he did not sit still simply because the President was absent. Indeed, we can actually see House become more anti-French in the few days that his President was gone. On 3rd January House was writing about a memo he had received from Lord Balfour regarding French propaganda in Syria, a region which the French were coming to regard as a sphere of interest. House noted with palpable fear on the strategic situation which the GW had created, as though he had suddenly become aware of it and had previously been blinded by promises of French friendship. Now that he was willing to embark on a new diplomatic course which upheld the English friendship, House would see whatever negative intentions that he wanted to see in the French behaviour. House wrote:

The English are beginning to be disturbed over France's growing imperialistic tendencies Six Months ago France was humble, even two months ago she did not begin to feel her importance, but every day now there is an indication that she intends to assert herself as the dominant Continental Power. I do not think it is realized by the rest of the world that this war leaves France the only great military power in Europe. Russia, Austria and Germany have gone down. England's army like our own will soon disappear, and there will be but one great military machine in the world, other than the British Navy. This fact must be reckoned with, particularly if France insists upon maintaining her army machine at anything like its present strength. I see many evidences that the English are concerned and do not like the prospect. The situation is not unlike that of 1871 when all of Europe sat by and allowed Germany to have her will. The difference there however was that there was always a great Russia, a considerable Austria, and a France not seriously hurt by the war she had lost. On the other hand it is to be remembered that France is a nation of less than forty million people and cannot go far alone.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This perception gives some indication of how House was coming to view France. His predictions regarding French military supremacy filling this power vacuum proved only partially true, and not at all long lasting, for the reason House adds in at the final sentence. The French were outnumbered almost two to one by the Germans, which meant that, in the long run, she could not maintain her military supremacy even if the 1920s were to see her throw her weight around to some extent. An offshoot of this viewpoint was that which stated, even if France may not be militarily predominant, she did possess the most professionally complete army in the world. This myth would be perpetuated right up until the moment when France collapsed in the summer of 1940, a fact which House never seemed to believe was possible, but which the sheer statistics alone provided for, and consequently Clemenceau worked day and night to guard against.

While House developed his attitude towards the French, his President was engaging with a potentially valuable partner in Italy. Italian pretensions to their neighbouring territory read like a long list of Italian imperialist and irredentist dreams; under the terms of the treaty which had brought Italy into the war on the allied side, these dreams were to be realised. Italy would possess its own European empire in the post-war world, to rival that which the Habsburgs had once owned. The Adriatic would be her sea, Illyria and portions of the Balkans her prizes, and the coveted Tyrol region would finally be returned to the rejoicing of all true Italians.[[5]](#footnote-5) The reality of these desires was far messier of course, and much more dangerous than the allies had once anticipated, not least because WW declared himself fundamentally opposed to any such imperialism. This opposition meant that a potentially frosty reception awaited the President in Rome, but at this stage, Wilson was not yet so vocal about how he really felt about the Italian demands.

As a result, the Italian tour proved to be the final gratifying stop off in an adventure which had brought the President through all the major allied capitals. In Rome, just like in Paris and London, Wilson received a welcome which convinced him that his principles and vision were in line with what the peoples of Europe wanted. In the evening of 1st January, Wilson’s party crossed the Franco-Italian border, and was met by the King’s envoy, who accompanied them by train all the way to Rome. Along the way they stopped briefly at Turin and Genoa, and to Wilson’s satisfaction, Italian tricolours lined the route alongside the stars and stripes, just as they had in Paris and London. Cheering crowds again lined the routes of his train carriage, and no matter the size of the Italian town he passed through, whether it was high in the mountains or down on the plains, shouts of *Viva l’America* rang out.

Clemenceau be damned, Wilson could easily have mused, the French premier’s archaic views of how Europe worked were evidently out of touch with what the European people wanted. From Paris, to London, to Turin, Genoa and Rome, these citizens of Europe wanted change, with Wilson’s vision spearheading that change. How could the statesmen ignore such a tide of passion; how indeed could they forget how warmly the President was welcomed; how could they proceed to negotiate for anything other than the realisation of the President’s vision, and of their peoples’ desires? Wilson would realise too late that these citizens were not yet as completely in control of their destiny as he liked to imagine; these same Italians would enter down a very different path within only a few months. The opinions of the masses changed just like the direction of Italy’s harsh Alpine winds – with ferocious speed, and with little record of what had once been.

Italy’s war record drew criticism as well as praise, but her people and her leaders provided arguably the most striking foil to the idea of allied cooperation, even if in early January Wilson received a warm welcome, and little indication of the bitterness which was to follow was here felt. Italy’s central problem was that her leaders possessed a very different expectation of how the PPC would play out, and they imagined a very different post-war division of spoils than what transpired. Where Italians had imagined themselves filling the hole left by the Habsburgs in the Balkans, Yugoslavia had unexpectedly emerged, and this was only one issue. Even her borders with France contained some measure of contention, and the borders with Austria had never been settled. As the historian George Kiss noted, writing in the aftermath of the SWW, Italy as an idea presented legions of problems to historians and political scientists alike: ‘Seldom in the long history of frontier disputes have a nation’s boundaries been discussed in as much detail as those of Italy, and seldom have so many divergent opinions been expressed.’[[6]](#footnote-6)

It proved impossible to satisfy Italy, or to contain the feelings of frustration and unfulfilled potential which Italians had been struggling with, north and south, since unification. It didn’t help that the Italian government was effectively thrown under the bus by Britain and France in the early phases of the PPC, when it became clear that Clemenceau and LG would side with Wilson’s uncompromising stance against imperialism, rather than uphold the Treaty of London which the Italian government had clung to since 1915. Had Italians known that Britain and France would break this treaty, it is possible that she may never have become involved in the war in the first place, and that she would have spared her countrymen the nearly 600,000 deaths which were incurred. This possibility is often forgotten – to those of us that know Italy’s fate after the FWW, and that know her statesmen’s claims to the Treaty of London were ignored, it is sometimes viewed as tough luck, or as only reasonable, and a rejection of the imperialistic policies of old. Yet, one need only look at the behaviour of Britain and France after 1919 to discern that imperialism was not abandoned, in fact it increased in other places and under other names.

That the Italian claims were ignored where the British and French claims were not meant that not only had the Italian war experience been absolutely horrible, it had also all been for nothing. When Italian men had struggled and died in the most dreadful conditions, atop some truly terrifying battlefield scenes so high above what seemed rational or strategically sensible, the thought process went that at least it would be for something worthwhile in the end. Italians already struggled with something of an inferiority complex before the war; the experience of having her war aims utterly spurned by the allies, and by the new American power on the block, was worse than a slap in the face, it was akin to a declaration that the British and French did not believe that the Italian sacrifice mattered, and that in any case, there was nothing the Italians could do to make London and Paris regret this abandonment of its ally.

Looking at things from the Italian perspective, and coming to grips with the unpalatable behaviour of the British and French, it is a great deal easier to understand why Italians moved towards the political margins, and elected to follow a man who promised to realise their potential, to make Italy a world power and the envy of the world, and above all to end the humiliation of Italy by righting past wrongs. It is easy to follow the old processes and paint Italy as the bad guy of the GW, or to view the turn to fascism under Mussolini as proof of Italy’s inherent ‘badness’, and to see it as a good thing that Italian imperialism was not given the blessing of those assembled at Paris. However, we must accept at the same time that Italians were no more expansionist or belligerent than their neighbours; unjust or grasping their claims on portions of the Balkans may appear, but how were British and French claims on the Middle East therefore justified where the Italian claims were not? The answer of course is that none of these imperialistic claims were justified or fair in the post-WW1 world, and the ultimate injustice is that a select few powers took advantage of the loopholes and shortcomings of WW’s ideology to attain even greater empires than they had had in the pre-1914 world, whereas others were informed that due to some newfound faith in lofty, high-minded ideals, such empires could no longer exist. It was no wonder Vittorio Orlando left Paris.

All this was to come though when WW entered Rome, on a triumph of his own making. The faith he was spreading was enthusiastically accepted by war weary Italians who were desperate to see what they wanted in the President’s dogma. Somehow, Italians believed they could have their imperial cake and eat it too, but this was not to last. Wilson must have been mindful of Italian sensitivities, and he was on his best behaviour. Meeting first for a dinner with the Italian King and Queen, when it came Wilson’s turn to propose a toast, the President took the opportunity to highlight the extensive history Italy shared with the US through immigration and emigration. ‘It has been a matter of pride’, Wilson began:

That so many Italians were in our own armies and associated with their brethren in Italy itself in the great enterprise of freedom. The Italians in the United States have excited a particular degree of admiration. They, I believe, are the only people of a given nationality who have been careful to organize themselves to see that their compatriots coming to America were from month to month and year to year guided to places in industries most suitable to their previous habits. No other nationality has taken such pains as that, and in serving their fellow countrymen they have served the United States because these people have found places where they would be most useful, and would most immediately earn their own living and add to the prosperity of the country itself.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Wilson was gifted a laundry list of honorary titles, citizenships and praises, during which time the President remained intensely diligent and respectful. He had useful meetings with Vittorio Orlando during the few days, and broke the ice between himself and the main Italian delegate which would soon refreeze. Wilson’s mission in Italy, as in the other allied states, was one of ingratiation and publicity; he wanted to spell out to the governments of Europe, and perhaps to his opposition at home, that his vision was a popular and valued one. In addition, it was important to build a rapport and to identify with each of what would be the Big Four before the Peace Conference thrust all these personalities together in the same room. Wilson was also not above making history for history’s sake; on 3rd January 1919, the President became the first man in his office to meet face to face with the Pope.

Like WW, Pope Benedict XV had enjoyed a rise in stature and reputation thanks to the war. Also like Wilson, Benedict despised the war and its traumas, and since he ascended to the position at the beginning of the war in September 1914, after his predecessor supposedly died of a broken heart due to his inability to prevent the conflagration, Benedict spent the majority of his time working out peace settlements. At one point, Benedict even imagined a ten point peace plan which addressed each of the problems of the powers in turn, and included learned observations on such issues as nationality, territory, empires, trade, reparations and historical memory. WW, it was said by some, was moved both by jealousy and admiration to be seen to develop his own 14 points. However the President and the Pope were connected in their peace overtures, it could not be denied that Wilson towered over Benedict in terms of influence and importance by early 1919. This, however, did not mean the President had no use for the Pope’s wide reaching voice.

The meeting between the two figures was pleasant, if a little cold. Wilson was exhaustively determined not to compromise on his Presbyterianism by accidentally agreeing to a Catholic blessing, and this occasionally led to awkward scenes where Wilson asked his translator, who spoke in French to Benedict, whether the Pontiff’s blessings were universal. A more uppity Pope might have taken offence, but Benedict was all smiles throughout. He offered Wilson a beautiful gift – an ornate mosaic of the first Pope, St Peter. Their first meeting represented one of many curious first time encounters between some very different individuals during an already eventful year. When he was escorted into the papal apartments, President Wilson had encountered the diminutive figure dressed in white, with the white skullcap atop a head of jet-black hair and a face and body that could only be described as “plain.”, and that was being generous. His facial features and physical appearance even led Benedict to refer to himself as being an “ugly gargoyle upon the buildings of Rome.” Plain though he may have been, Benedict seemed to have prepared himself well for this moment; he was animated not only with patience and concern, but also with a kindness that enabled him to greet the president accordingly: he took Wilson by the hand and led him into the study for their conference.

There was very little, politically, that Pope Benedict could negotiate with the American President, but the papal visit still represented an important first step towards the American political penetration into Europe. It had been a journey of firsts, and all the while, Wilson was accompanied by the music to his ears – the enthusiastic cheers of Italian citizens. Once again, the President was vindicated. He left Benedict in high spirits, and the next day met with Orlando again. Before he left for France, Wilson was determined to stop for a few hours in Genoa, in spite of a terrible storm, to pay his respects to Christopher Columbus. This symbolism, founded in the man’s genuine interest, demonstrated that America was opening up to the world like never before, and recognising its historic roots. If Italians believed that these roots would lead Wilson to give them all they wanted though, they were to be sadly, tragically mistaken.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Wilson returned from his Italian trip and arrived back in Paris on 7th January 1919. During this period in time 100 years ago then, the President had just finished his final private tour of the Big Four. He was ready to begin the actual festivities which would lead all the way up to the formal opening of the PPC in ten days’ time. ‘I had a very long talk with the President today, over the private telephone’, noted House in his diary on 7th January, ‘and I gave him pretty much of a resume of what had happened since he left Paris. He told me of his Italian trip with which he was very pleased.’ What exactly had happened since Wilson had left Paris? In fact, House claimed to have accomplished a great deal: that same day he had met with an emotional GC who, House noted, was now all for the LON, thanks to the arguments which had been put forward regarding French security being bound up in the new League.

‘I think of you as a brother and I want you to tell me everything that is in your mind, and we will work together just as if we were parts of the same government’, Clemenceau replied, having clasped House’s shoulders warmly in an embrace. The French premier, so it seemed, had seen the light, and been persuaded of the core essence of the LON. Reading his diary, House appears to have been the most successful and consistent diplomatist of his age; here once more had the opposition of an ally been overcome, just like that of Lloyd George in November.[[9]](#footnote-9) Notwithstanding House’s generous account of his activities, the French premier had come to see the value in not opposing the Americans, at least not directly. With WW’s return, and with the anticipation of all that awaited these men hanging heavy in the air, it was perhaps to be expected that Wilson, Clemenceau and DLG spared few thoughts for what was happening in Germany. Revolution, so it was said, had finally swept through Berlin, and some could be forgiven for believing that here was history repeating itself again. The tardy allied response had facilitated a Bolshevik triumph in the depressed German capital…or had it? Only time could tell whether the fearsome Spartacists represented a momentary threat or a terrifying new world order completely at odds with that of WW’s making…

1. See Macmillan, *Peacemakers*, pp. 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Edward Mandell House, MS 466, *Edward Mandell House Papers*, Series II, Diaries, Volume 6, p. 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. House, MS 466, *Edward Mandell House Papers*, Series II, Diaries, Volume 7, pp. 1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*, pp. 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Italy’s relationship with the Tyrol region helped to facilitate its entry into the Great War on the allied side, since Austria was unwilling to cede the region, whereas the British and French eagerly promised it in a post-war settlement. See Josef L. Kunz, ‘The Italo-Austrian Agreement on the Austrian South Tyrol’, *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Apr., 1947), pp. 439-445. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. George Kiss, ‘Italian Boundary Problems: A Review’, *Geographical Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Jan., 1947), pp. 137-141; p. 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See http://www.iitaly.org/magazine/focus/facts-stories/article/war-president-who-wasnt-loser-and-his-trip-italy [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See https://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/pope-and-president-benedict-xv-and-woodrow-wilson-are-there-any-catholics-here [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. House, *Edward Mandell House Papers*, Series II, Diaries, Volume 7, pp. 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)