

The Paris Peace Conference

In January 1919, the peace conference began its deliberations in Paris. Delegates representing some thirty-two nations attended. The main decisions, however, were made by the Council of Four: President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) of the United States, Premier Clemenceau of France, Prime Minister Lloyd George of Great Britain, and Premier Vittorio Orlando (1860-1952) of Italy. Neither Germany nor Soviet Russia was represented.

Wilson's Fourteen Points

A year earlier, in January 1918, President Wilson had presented his proposals for a peace based on principles of justice. In the Fourteen Points, he called for open diplomacy, freedom of the seas, free trade, and a reduction of armaments, and he urged self-determination for the subject peoples of the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires. In the fourteenth point, Wilson endorsed the creation of “a general association of nations.” The League of Nations became the central part of Wilson’s vision of the postwar world, and the Fourteen Points as a whole put the United States on a collision course with the European Allies.

French, British, and Italian Objectives

While Wilson sought to promote what he had earlier termed a “peace without victory,” Clemenceau was determined to gain security for France against a possible future resurgence of German power. In addition, the French premier demanded substantial reparations from Germany to pay for the reconstruction of war-ravaged northern France. Lloyd George hoped to restore a continental balance of power so that Great Britain could devote its attention to its empire, while Orlando’s primary objective was to gain as much territory as possible for Italy.

The Treaty of Versailles

The Paris Peace Conference produced five treaties for Germany, Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey. The most

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important was the Treaty of Versailles, the peace settlement with Germany.

The Rhineland

In drafting this treaty, a major controversy developed over French demands regarding the German Rhineland. Clemenceau wanted to separate the Rhineland from Germany in order to create a buffer state along the Franco-German border. Wilson objected, citing the principle of national self-determination. A compromise was reached, providing that the Allies would occupy the Rhineland for a period of fifteen years and that the Rhineland would be permanently demilitarized. In addition, in the Pact of Guarantees, the United States and Great Britain promised to come to the defense of France in the event of a future German attack. However, neither Great Britain nor the United States ever ratified this pact.

Alsace and Lorraine; the Saar

The Treaty of Versailles restored the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine to France. The treaty provided further that the coal-rich area of the Saar in western Germany would be placed under the control of the League of Nations for fifteen years. During this period, the coal of the Saar would be the absolute property of the French state. This was done to compensate France for the damage done during the war to the coal mines of northern France. At the end of the fifteen-year period, a plebiscite would determine the Saar's future. When the plebiscite was held in 1935, the people of the Saar voted to return to German control.

Poland

Germany suffered small territorial losses to Belgium and Denmark, but the most extensive territorial losses occurred in the east. The newly recreated Poland received a large piece of eastern Germany. In particular, the Polish Corridor was created to give Poland access to the Baltic Sea. The Polish Corridor separated East Prussia from the rest of Germany. The Germans greatly resented this as they resented the Allies' decision to make the port city of

Danzig, at the head of the Polish Corridor, into a free city. Although Danzig was largely German in population, it was separated from Germany in order to provide Poland with a seaport that was not under German control.



German Disarmament and Reparations

The disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles also caused resentment among the Germans. The German army was restricted to 100,000 men, to be raised by long-term enlistments, while the navy was reduced to the status of a coastal defense force. Germany was to be allowed no air force, no tanks, and no submarines.

Article 231 of the treaty became known as the war-guilt clause. Under its terms, Germany and its allies accepted the responsibility for causing the war. This provided the justification for requiring Germany to pay reparations to the Allies.

Signing of Treaty

When the drafting of the Treaty of Versailles was completed, a German delegation was summoned to Paris, where the treaty was

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signed in the Hall of Mirrors of the Palace of Versailles on June 28, 1919.

The Mandate System

Africa

The Treaty of Versailles deprived Germany of its colonies in Africa and the Pacific. The German colonies in Africa were assigned to Great Britain, the Union of South Africa, and France as mandates under the nominal supervision of the League of Nations. The mandate system was designed to protect the indigenous populations and to prepare them for independence, but in practice the system proved little more than disguised annexation.

The Pacific

Germany's islands in the North Pacific went to Japan as mandates, while Australia and New Zealand acquired Germany's island colonies in the South Pacific.

The Middle East

The Treaty of Sèvres, signed in August 1920, deprived Turkey of its Arab lands in the Middle East. France acquired Syria and Lebanon as mandates, while British mandates included Palestine, Transjordan, and Iraq.

The League of Nations

For Wilson, the most important issue at the Paris Peace Conference was the creation of the League of Nations, an association of states that would replace traditional power politics with a commitment to use peaceful means in the resolution of international disputes.

The Covenant of the League of Nations provided for the creation of an Assembly, representing all the members of the League; a Council, a smaller body with the major powers as permanent members along with several other members elected by the Assembly; and a Secretariat, which would be the League's

administrative body. The Assembly, Council, and Secretariat would all be headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland. The Permanent Court of International Justice (PCIJ) operated under a protocol separate from the Covenant. Popularly known as the World Court, the PCIJ had its headquarters in the Dutch capital of The Hague.

At Wilson's insistence, the Covenant of the League was included as a part of the Treaty of Versailles and the other four peace treaties drafted at Paris. The United States did not join the League of Nations because of opposition in the Senate, which refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles.

Conflict over Italy's Claims

Italy's claims for territory at the expense of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire caused a major conflict at the Paris Peace Conference. Italy demanded and received the Trentino, a former Austrian possession with a large German minority, and Istria, with its seaport of Trieste. This area had also belonged to Austria. Although the population of Trieste was predominantly Italian, Istria itself was overwhelmingly Slovene, and on the basis of national self-determination, it should have been assigned to the new country of Yugoslavia.

Wilson resisted the Italian demand for Fiume, which was to be Yugoslavia's major seaport. The statesmen in Paris never resolved the Fiume question; it was left to be settled by direct negotiations between Italy and Yugoslavia (see Chapter 31). Italy's claims for territory in Africa and Asia Minor were not fulfilled.

Self-Determination in Eastern Europe

Wilson strongly supported the principle of national self-determination, although it proved difficult in practice to draw boundaries in areas where national groups were intermingled, which was generally the case throughout Eastern Europe.

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Austria and Hungary

The end of the war brought with it the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Treaty of Saint-Germain, signed in September 1919, reduced Austria to the status of a small German-Austrian national state. The Treaty of Trianon, signed in June 1920, made Hungary a national state for the Magyars.

Czechoslovakia

The new country of Czechoslovakia was created entirely from territory taken from Austria and Hungary. Czechoslovakia was awarded the province of the Sudetenland, which had previously been a part of Austria, even though it was inhabited mainly by German-speaking people.

Yugoslavia

To the south, Yugoslavia emerged as the national state of the South Slavs, joining the formerly independent states of Serbia and Montenegro with territory lost by Austria and Hungary.

Rumania

The Treaty of Trianon awarded Rumania the province of Transylvania, which had a large Hungarian minority. In addition, Rumania took advantage of Russia's weakness to annex Bessarabia.

The Baltic Countries

Finland and the three small Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania also profited from Russia's weakness and won their independence.

Poland

In addition to acquiring territory from Germany under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, Poland gained Galicia from Austria under the terms of the Treaty of Saint-Germain. In 1920, the Poles waged a successful war against Russia and pushed their frontiers eastward.

Bulgaria

The Treaty of Neuilly, signed in November 1919, deprived Bulgaria of its outlet to the Aegean Sea, which was awarded to Greece. Bulgaria also lost territory to Yugoslavia.

World War I cost millions of lives and did immense physical damage. The war also brought the collapse of the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman empires.

The statesmen who met in the Paris Peace Conference faced many problems and produced an imperfect settlement. While the Germans condemned the Treaty of Versailles as unjust, it did not reduce Germany to the rank of a second- or third-rate power, as the history of the next quarter century would demonstrate. France, although victorious, emerged from the war in a seriously weakened state, unable to maintain the peace settlement without British and American support. Italy's failure to acquire the territory it demanded left the Italians in an angry and bitter mood.