

Care to express an opinion on a current or past historical event?

Need to ask a question from our many visitors?

Just visit our Message Board and leave your message.

[Message Board](#)

[Weekly Poll](#)

Everywhere one looks you see sadness these days. The other day on the train a woman sat counting the fingers on her hand. One, two, three, four, five she said, then began the counting again. She repeated herself over and over. Some of us riding the car couldn't help but to start smiling at her. Her husband then spoke in a soft voice. Ladies and gentlemen, please don't laugh at my wife. She has lost all five of her sons in battle defending our fine nation. Now she is gone in the head and I am taking her to the asylum.

[The Nations Involved in WWI](#)

[Between the Wars](#)

[Bismarck](#)

[Declaration of War \(American\)](#)

[Flanders Field](#)

[Gavrilo Princip](#)

[Kaiser Wilhelm II](#)

[Marne](#)

[Otto Dix](#)

[Passchendaele](#)

[Pershing](#)

[Sasson](#)

[Schlieffen Plan](#)

[Somme](#)

[Submarine](#)

[Verdun](#)

[Wilfred Owen, "Gas"](#)

[Woodrow Wilson](#)

[World War One Battles](#)

Letters from the Front

Tragic War And Futile Peace: World War I, Part 2
Date: 1992

The Allied Peace Settlement

In November 1918 the Allies stood triumphant, after the costliest war in history. But the Germans could also feel well pleased in 1918. They had fought well, avoided being overrun, and escaped being occupied by the Allies. They could acknowledge they had lost the war but hoped that U.S. President Wilson could help them. In February 1918 Wilson had stated that "there shall be no annexations, no contributions, no punitive damages," and on July 4 he affirmed that every question must be settled "upon the basis of the free acceptance of that settlement by the people immediately concerned." ^8 As events transpired, the losers were refused seats at the peace conference and were the recipients of a dictated settlement.

[Footnote 8: Quoted in L. M. Hacker and B. B. Kendrick, *The United States Since 1865* (New York: F. S. Crofts and Co., 1939), p. 520.]

Idealism And Realities

The destructive nature of World War I made a fair peace settlement impossible. The war had been fought on a winner-take-all basis, and now it was time for the Central Powers to pay. At the peace conference, the winning side was dominated by a French realist, a British politician, and an American idealist. The French representative was the aged French Premier Georges Clemenceau, representing Britain was the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, and the U.S. representative was President Woodrow Wilson. The three were joined by the Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando, who attended to make sure his country gained adequate compensation for its large sacrifices. These four men made most of the key decisions, even though most of the interested nations and factions in the world were represented in Paris, except for the Soviet Union.

Clemenceau had played a colorful and important role in French politics for half a century. He had fought continuously for his political beliefs, opposing corruption, racism, and antidemocratic forces. He wanted to ensure French security in the future by pursuing restitution, reparations, and guarantees. Precise programs, not idealistic statements, would protect France.

The two English-speaking members of the big three represented the extremes in dealing with the Germans. Lloyd George had been reelected in December on a program of "squeezing the German lemon until the pips are squeaked." He wanted to destroy Berlin's naval, commercial, and colonial position and to ensure his own political future at home. In January 1918 U.S. President Wilson had issued to Congress the Fourteen Points describing his plan for peace. Wilson wanted to break the world out of its tradition of armed anarchy and establish a framework for peace that would favor America's traditions of democracy and trade. At the peace conference he communicated his beliefs with a coldness and an imperiousness that masked his shy and sensitive nature and offended his colleagues.

The World War had not been a "war to end all wars" or a "war to make the world safe for democracy," as Wilson had portrayed it. The United States had hardly been neutral in its loans and shipments of supplies to the Allies before 1917. In fact, during the war, the financial and political center of balance for the world had crossed the ocean. The Americans made a rather abrupt shift from debtor to creditor status. The United States had entered the war late and had profited from it, and Wilson could afford to wear a rather more idealistic mantle.

The Europeans had paid for the war with the blood of their young and the coin of their realms. ^9 The Allies now looked forward to a healthy return on their investment. The extent of that harvest had long been mapped out in secret treaties, copies of which the Bolsheviks released for the world to see.

[Footnote 9: A. J. Ryder, *Twentieth Century Germany: From Bismarck to Brandt* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 132-141.]

Open Covenants, Secret Treaties

[Edward Luckart](#)

[Albert Smith](#)

A Special Christmas Story

[Christmas 1914](#)

Music from World War One

[Over There](#)

[Long Way To Tipperary](#)

[Pack Up Your Troubles](#)

Wilson wanted to use his Fourteen Points as the base for a lasting peace. He wanted to place morality and justice ahead of power and revenge as considerations in international affairs. The first five points were general in nature and guaranteed: "open covenants openly arrived at," freedom of the seas in war and peace alike, removal of all economic barriers and establishment of an equality of trade among all nations, reductions in national armaments, and readjustment of all colonial claims, giving the interests of the population concerned equal weight with the claim of the government whose title was to be determined. The next eight points dealt with specific issues involving the evacuation and restoration of Allied territory, self-determination for minority nationalities, and the redrawing of European boundaries along national lines.

The fourteenth point contained the germ of the League of Nations - a general association of all nations, whose purpose was to guarantee political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike. When Wilson arrived in Europe, the crowds on the streets and the victorious and the defeated nations alike greeted him as a messiah. His program had received great publicity, and its general, optimistic nature had earned him great praise.

The victorious Allies came to Paris to gain the concrete rewards promised them in the various secret treaties. Under these pacts, which would not come to public knowledge until the beginning of 1919, the Allies had promised the Italians concessions that would turn the Adriatic into an Italian sea, the Russians the right to take over the Straits and Constantinople, the Romanians the right to take over large amounts of Austro-Hungarian territory, and the Japanese the right to keep the German territory of Kiaochow in China. In addition, the British and French divided what was formerly Ottoman-controlled Iraq and Syria into their respective spheres of influence. An international administrative organization would govern Palestine. In 1917 Great Britain pledged its support of "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people."

Wilson refused to consider these agreements, which many of the victors regarded as IOUs now due to be paid in return for their role in the war; but the contracting parties in the treaties would not easily set aside their deals to satisfy Wilson's ideals. Even before formal talks - negotiations that would be unprecedented in their complexity - began, the Allies were split. Lloyd George and Clemenceau discovered early that Wilson had his price, and that was the League of Nations. They played on his desire for this organization to water down most of the thirteen other points. They were also aware that Wilson's party had suffered a crushing defeat in the 1918 elections and that strong factions in the United States were drumming up opposition to his program.

The League Of Nations

When the diplomats began their first full meetings, the first issue was the formation of the League of Nations. Wilson insisted that the first work of the conference must be to provide for a league of nations as part of the peace treaty. After much negotiation, the covenant was approved by the full conference in April 1919. In order to gain support for the League, however, Wilson had to compromise on other matters. His Fourteen Points were partially repudiated, but he believed that an imperfect treaty incorporating the League was better than a perfect one without it.

[See Vive Wilson: When Wilson arrived in Europe in December 1918, cheering crowds hailed him as the "peacemaker from America." This photograph is from the parade in Paris. From National Archives]

The Covenant of the League of Nations specified its aims "to guarantee international cooperation and to achieve international peace and security." To achieve this goal, Article X, the key section of the document, provided that

The Members of the League undertake to respect and preserve against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League. In case of any such aggression or in case of any threat or danger of such aggression, the Council shall advise upon the means by which this obligation shall be fulfilled. ^10

[Footnote 10: Quoted in F. P. Walters, A History of the League of Nations, I (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952), p. 48.]

The League of Nations was the first systematic and thorough attempt to create an organization designed to prevent war and promote peace. It was a valiant effort to curb the abuses of the state system while maintaining the individual sovereignty of each member of the community of nations.

The League's main organs were the Council, the Assembly, and the Secretariat. Dominated by the great powers, the Council was the most important body. It dealt with most of the emergencies arising in international affairs. The Assembly served as a platform from which all League members could express their views. It could make recommendations to the Council on specific issues, but all important decisions required the unanimous consent of its members, and every nation in the Assembly had one vote.

The Secretariat, which had fifteen departments, represented the bureaucracy of the League. Numbering about 700, the personnel of the Secretariat constituted the first example in history of an international civil service whose loyalty was pledged to no single nation but to the interests of the world community. All treaties made by members of the League had to be registered with the Secretariat. It handled routine administrative matters relating to such League concerns as disarmament, health problems, the administration of former German colonies, and the protection of oppressed minorities.

Two other important bodies created by the Covenant of the League were the Permanent Court of International Justice and the International Labor Organization (ILO). The first was commonly referred to as the World Court. Its main purpose was to "interpret any disputed point in international law and determine when treaty obligations had been violated." It could also give advisory opinions to the Council or Assembly when asked for them. By 1937 forty-one nations had agreed to place before the World Court most basic international disputes to which they were a party. The ILO was established to "secure and maintain fair and humane conditions of labor for men, women, and children." The organization consisted of three divisions: a general conference, a governing body, and the International Labor Office.

Redrawing German Boundaries

After establishing the League, the diplomats got down to the business of dealing with Germany. France reclaimed Alsace-Lorraine, and plebiscites gave part of the former German empire to Denmark and Belgium. The French wanted to build a buffer state made up of former German territory west of the Rhine to be dominated by France. The Americans and the British proposed a compromise to Clemenceau which he accepted. The territory in question would be occupied by Allied troops for a period of from five to fifteen years, and a zone extending 50 kilometers east of the Rhine was to be demilitarized.

In addition, the French claimed the Saar basin, a rich coal area. Although they did not take outright control of the area - it reverted to the League administration - they did gain ownership of the mines, in compensation for the destruction of their own installations in northern France. It was agreed that after fifteen years a plebiscite would be held in the area. Finally Wilson and Lloyd George agreed that the United States and Great Britain by treaty would guarantee France against aggression.

To the east, the conference created the Polish Corridor, which separated East Prussia from the rest of Germany, in order to give the newly created state of Poland access to the sea. This creation raised grave problems, as it included territory in which there were not only Polish majorities but also large numbers of Germans. The land in question had been taken from Prussia in the eighteenth century. A section of Silesia was also ceded to Poland, but Danzig, a German city, was placed under League jurisdiction. All in all, Germany lost 25,000 square miles inhabited by 6 million people, a fact seized upon by German nationalist leaders in the 1920s.

The Mandate System And Reparations

A curious mixture of idealism and revenge determined the allocation of the German colonies and certain territories belonging to Turkey. Because outright annexation would look too much like unvarnished imperialism, it was suggested that the colonies be turned over to the League which in turn would give them to certain of its members to administer. The colonies were to be known as mandates, and precautions were taken to ensure that they would be administered for the well-being and development of the inhabitants. Once a

year the mandatory powers were to present a detailed account of their administration of the territories of the League. The mandate system was a step forward in colonial administration, but Germany nevertheless was deprived of all colonies, with the excuse that it could not rule them justly or efficiently.

As the Treaty of Versailles took shape, the central concept was that Germany had been responsible for the war. Article 231 of the treaty stated explicitly:

The Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her Allies. ^11

[Footnote 11: Quoted in R. J. Sontag, *European Diplomatic History, 1871-1932* (New York: Century Co., 1933), p. 275.]

Britain and France demanded that Germany pay the total cost of the war, including pensions. The United States protested this demand, and eventually a compromise emerged in which, with the exception of Belgium, Germany had to pay only war damages, including those suffered by civilians, and the cost of pensions. These payments, called reparations (implying repair) were exacted on the ground that Germany should bear the responsibility for the war.

Although the Allies agreed that Germany should pay reparations, they could not agree on how much should be paid. Some demands ran as high as \$200 billion. Finally, it was decided that a committee should fix the amount; in the meantime Germany was to begin making payments. By the time the committee report appeared in May 1921, the payments totaled nearly \$2 billion. The final bill came to \$32.5 billion, to be paid off by Germany by 1963.

The Allies required Germany, as part of "in kind" reparations payments, to hand over most of its merchant fleet, construct one million tons of new shipping for the Allies, and deliver vast amounts of coal, equipment, and machinery to them. The conference permitted Germany a standing army of only 100,000 men, a greatly reduced fleet, and no military aircraft. Munitions plants were also to be closely supervised.

The treaty also called for the kaiser to be tried for a "supreme offense against international morality and the sanctity of treaties," thus setting a precedent for the Nuremberg tribunals after World War II. Nothing came of this demand, however, as the kaiser remained in his Dutch haven.

[See *Peace Settlement In Europe: The Peace Settlement in Europe*]

Dictated Treaties

Before coming to Paris in April 1919 to receive the Treaty of Versailles, the German delegation was given no official information about its terms. Even though the German foreign minister denied that "Germany and its people ... were alone guilty ...," ^12 he had no alternative but to sign. The continued blockade created great hardships in Germany, and the Allies threatened an invasion if the Germans did not accept the peace. The treaty was signed on June 28, the fifth anniversary of the assassination of the Archduke Francis Ferdinand, in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, the same room where the German empire had been proclaimed. As one American wrote, "The affair was elaborately staged and made as humiliating to the enemy as it well could be."
^13

[Footnote 12: Quoted in E. Achorn, *European Civilization and Politics Since 1815* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1938), p. 470.]

[Footnote 13: Quoted in Sontag, *European Diplomatic History, 1871-1932*, p. 392.]

[See *The Mask Falls: This German cartoon, "The Mask Falls", expresses German reaction to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, which held Germany and its allies totally responsible for the war and demanded huge reparations. From "Illustrite Zeitung, May 22, 1919.*]

The Allies imposed equally harsh treaties on Germany's supporters. The Treaty of St. Germain (1919) with Austria recognized the nationalist movements of the Czechs, Poles, and South Slavs. These groups had already formed

states and reduced the remnants of the former Dual Monarchy into the separate states of Austria and Hungary. Austria became a landlocked country of 32,000 square miles and 6 million people. It was forbidden to seek Anschluss - union with Germany. Italy acquired sections of Austria, South Tyrol, Trentino (with its 250,000 Austrian Germans), and the northeastern coast of the Adriatic, with its large numbers of Slavs.

To complete their control of the Adriatic, the Italians wanted a slice of the Dalmatian coast and the port of Fiume. Fiume, however, was the natural port for the newly created state of Yugoslavia, and it had not been promised to the Italians in 1915. Wilson declared the Italian claim to be a contradiction of the principle of self-determination, and the ensuing controversy almost wrecked the peace conference. The issue was not settled until 1920, when Italy renounced its claim to Dalmatia and Fiume became an independent state. Four years later it was ceded to Italy.

By the Treaty of Sevres (1920), the Ottoman empire was placed on the operating table of power politics and divided among Greece, Britain, and France. An upheaval in August 1920 in Constantinople led to the emergence of the Nationalists under Mustapha Kemal, who refused to accept the treaty. Not until July 1923 did Turkey's postwar status become clear in the milder Treaty of Lausanne, which guaranteed Turkish control of Anatolia.

Hungary (Treaty of Trianon, 1920) and Bulgaria (Treaty of Neuilly, 1919) did not fare as well as Turkey in dealing with the Allies. The Hungarians lost territory to Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania. Bulgaria lost access to the Aegean Sea and territory populated by nearly one million people, had to pay a huge indemnity, and underwent demilitarization.

Those eastern European states that profited from the settlements proved to be useful allies for France in the first fifteen years of the interwar period. Those that suffered were easy prey for the Nazis in the 1930s.

[See European Democracies: 1920-1940]

Evaluating The Peacemakers

The treaties ending the First World War have received heavy criticism from diplomatic historians, especially when compared with the work of the Congress of Vienna. The peace that emerged brought only weariness, new disagreements, and inflation.

There was a complete disregard of Russia. Lenin's government, in its weak position, indicated a willingness to deal with the west on the issue of prewar debts and border conflicts, if the west would extend financial aid and withdraw its expeditionary forces. The anti-Bolshevik forces in Paris did not take the offer seriously.¹⁴ By missing this opportunity the Allies, in the view of a major American observer, took a course that had tremendous consequences for "the long-term future of both the Russian and the American people and indeed of mankind generally."¹⁵

[Footnote 14: Louis Fischer, *The Soviets in World Affairs* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), p. 116.]

[Footnote 15: George F. Kennan, *The Decision to Intervene* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1958), p. 471.]

Many commentators have laid the genesis of the Second World War just one generation later at the feet of the Paris peacemakers. The opportunism of Orlando and the chauvinism and revenge-seeking nature of both Clemenceau and Lloyd George appear short-sighted. Other critics point that the United States' reversion to isolationism doomed the work of the conference. Furthermore, never were there any broad plans for European economic recovery.

Considering the difficult conditions under which it was negotiated, the peace settlement was as good as could be expected. The delegates were the prisoners of their own constituents, who had themselves been heavily influenced by wartime propaganda. In addition, the diplomats had to deal with the nationalistic pressures and territorial conflicts of the newly formed eastern European nations. Given the costs of the war and the hopes for the peace, it is not surprising that the treaties left a legacy of disappointment for those who won and bitterness for those who lost. Symbolic of the obstacles faced by the statesmen was the fact that while they worked to return order, the globe reeled under the blows of a Spanish influenza outbreak that, when the costs were added up, was shown to have killed twice as many as had died in the war. The influenza outbreak was both a tragic conclusion to the war years

and a sign for the future.