The Paris Peace Conference and Treaty of Versailles of 1919

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Image 1. Crowds gather at Versailles Palace in France after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles on June 28, 1919. Photo from the public domain

World War I ended in 1918, about 100 years ago. Soon after, the Paris Peace Conference was called so that countries could work out the terms of the peace. The Conference took place in January 1919 at the palace of Versailles, just outside Paris in France.
The Conference was a meeting between the leaders of 30 countries. The talks were mostly controlled by the leaders of four major powers. These leaders were David Lloyd George of the United Kingdom, Georges Clemenceau of France, Woodrow Wilson of the United States and Vittorio Emanuele Orlando of Italy. They became known as the "Big Four."

The Paris Peace Conference led to the Treaty of Versailles. Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria were all on the losing side of the war. No one from these countries was allowed to take part in the talks that led to the Treaty. That made the Germans very angry.

**Wilson's Fourteen Points**

The Germans were also furious that Wilson's Fourteen Points plan was dropped. Wilson had come up with Fourteen Points to set up a peace that would last. They included a promise that no country would be forced to give up the lands it had before the war. They also promised that all countries would have fewer weapons.
The French and British had other ideas. In the end, they won out, and the Treaty of Versailles punished Germany much more than Wilson had wanted.

The Treaty required the new German government to give up part of the territory that belonged to Germany before the war. Poland was made into an independent country, after being under German control. The German region of East Prussia was separated from the rest of Germany by a strip of land that was given to Poland. East Prussia was part of the broader region of Prussia, the most powerful German territory. Germany also had to give up all its colonies in Africa and in other parts of the world.

The Treaty limited the size of the German army and navy. Yet the war's winners did not have to reduce their armed forces. The Germans also had to agree to pay $32 billion to the winning countries.
Demands Anger Germans

These demands made the Germans very angry. Germany's Foreign Minister, Count von Brockdorff-Rantzau, wrote a letter of protest to the head of the Conference. He said that the Germans fully meant to do everything expected of them. At the same time, they hoped for the just peace that was promised. Instead, he said they were horrified by the demands. Germany had been cut into pieces, but still had to pay all of the enemy's war costs. He said it was impossible for Germany to rebuild herself, and that the signing the Treaty was like signing Germany's death sentence.
In later years, the Treaty was changed so the demands wouldn't be so harsh. Still, many Germans remained deeply angry. Their anger helped bring Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party to power. During these years, Germany also began rebuilding its armed forces.

**Winners And Losers In Europe Connected**

Many people thought that the Treaty was more harmful than helpful. In 1919, the British economist John Maynard Keynes spoke against the Treaty. He said that Germany had done great damage to Europe, but France and Britain now ran the risk of "completing the ruin." Keynes said the Treaty could have helped Europe rebuild, but it damaged Europe even more. He said both winners and losers in Europe were deeply connected. They were bound by trade, business and all sorts of hidden connections. If one side fell, the other side would suffer, too.