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

Shortly after the end of World War I, the Paris Peace Conference was called to establish the terms of the peace. It took place in January 1919 at the palace of Versailles, just outside Paris.
Though nearly 30 nations participated, the representatives of four major powers largely controlled the proceedings: David Lloyd George of the United Kingdom, Georges Clemenceau of France, Woodrow Wilson of the United States and Vittorio Emanuele Orlando of Italy. These men became known as the "Big Four."

The Paris Peace Conference resulted in the drafting of the Treaty of Versailles. The Treaty reflected the compromises reached at the conference. It included plans to form the League of Nations, which was conceived as a way for nations to work out their differences peacefully. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson was a strong supporter of the League, as he believed it would prevent future wars.

**Complicated Negotiations**

However, negotiations at the Paris Peace Conference were complicated. The United Kingdom, France and Italy had fought together as the Allied Powers, while the United States entered the war in April 1917 as an Associated Power. Although it fought alongside the Allies, the United
States did not have to honor pre-existing agreements among the Allied Powers. These agreements focused on the redistribution of territories after the war. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson strongly opposed many of these arrangements. This often led to significant disagreements among the "Big Four."

**Promise That All Powers Would Disarm Equally**

Certain nations were excluded from the Treaty negotiations. One of these nations was Russia, whose communist government was not recognized by Allied powers. The defeated Central Powers — Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria — were excluded from negotiations as well. This infuriated the German representatives, who had requested an end to the fighting on the assumption that Wilson’s Fourteen Points would be maintained. The Fourteen Points were a series of measures conceived by Wilson to guarantee a just peace. They included the promise that all powers involved in the war would disarm equally. They also included the respect of national borders. Yet, at the urging of the French and British, the Treaty of Versailles punished Germany much more harshly than Wilson had intended.
The Treaty required the new German government to surrender approximately 10 percent of its prewar territory in Europe and all of its overseas possessions. It placed the harbor city of Danzig, now Gdansk, and the coal-rich Saarland under the administration of the League of Nations. The territories of Alsace and Lorraine were returned from Germany to France. Other German territories were transferred to Belgium and Denmark. Poland was given independence and a land corridor to the Baltic Sea, separating the region of East Prussia from the rest of Germany.

**War Criminals**

The Treaty limited the size of the German army and navy. It also allowed for the trial of Kaiser Wilhelm II and a number of other high-ranking German officials as war criminals.

Under the terms of the Treaty, the Germans accepted responsibility for the war and agreed to pay financial reparations to the Allies. The amount owed was set at 132 billion gold Reichmarks, or 32 billion U.S. dollars. And that was on top of the initial $5 billion payment demanded by the Treaty.

**Germany Opposes Harsh Conditions**

The harsh conditions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles were bitterly opposed by Germany. The German Foreign Minister, Count von Brockdorff-Rantzau, wrote the following in a letter of complaint to Georges Clemenceau, who was president of the conference. He said the Germans
"were firmly resolved to do everything in our power" to meet the "grave obligations which we had undertaken." At the same time, "we hoped for the peace of justice which had been promised to us." Now, that hope had been dashed. The Germans were horrified to learn of the Treaty's demands.

"Death Sentence"

Brockdorff-Rantzau said that Germany had been cut in pieces and weakened. Now, the country also had to "bear all the war expenses of her enemies." He claimed those expenses were many times greater than the total amount of German public and private wealth. He said that a debt this size made it impossible for Germany to rebuild herself. In other words, the Allied powers were asking a whole people to sign their own "death sentence."
In the years that followed, the Allies would at first attempt to enforce the original terms. However, the Treaty went through revisions, many of which lessened the demands made of Germany. Despite this, many Germans remained deeply resentful. Their resentment helped pave the way for the rise of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party. In the years that followed the Treaty, Germany began rebuilding its armed forces.

The Treaty was also criticized by individuals from the winning countries. In 1919, the British economist John Maynard Keynes wrote the following in his book "The Economic Consequences of the Peace." He said that driven "by insane and reckless self-regard," Germany had done great damage to Europe. But France and Britain had "run the risk of completing the ruin." Keynes said that, instead of restoring peace and economic well-being, the Peace of Paris would damage Europe further. He added that by abusing their power as victors, and destroying a weakened Germany and Austria-Hungary, France and Italy were inviting their own destruction. According to Keynes, both sides of the war were deeply connected by hidden economic bonds. If one side collapsed, the other would suffer as well.