The Paris Peace Conference and Treaty of Versailles of 1919

The Paris Peace Conference was called to establish the terms of the peace after World War I. It was convened in January 1919 at the palace of Versailles, just outside Paris. Though nearly 30 nations participated, the representatives of four major powers dominated 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."
League Of Nations

The Paris Peace Conference resulted in the formulation of the Treaty of Versailles, which officially ended the war. The Treaty of Versailles articulated the compromises reached at the conference. It included the planned formation of the League of Nations, which was conceived as a way for nations to work out their differences peacefully and to develop mutual security arrangements. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson was a strong advocate of the League as he believed it would prevent future wars.

Disagreements Among "Big Four"

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 was not bound to honor pre-existing agreements among the Allied Powers. These
agreements focused on postwar redistribution of territories. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson strongly opposed many of these arrangements, including Italian demands of a port city on the Adriatic Sea. This often led to significant disagreements among the "Big Four."

Treaty negotiations were also weakened by the absence of other important nations. Russia had fought as one of the Allies until December 1917, when its new Bolshevik government withdrew from the war. The Bolshevik decision not to honor Russia’s outstanding financial debts to the Allies and to publish the texts of secret agreements between the Allies concerning the postwar period angered the Allies. The Allied Powers refused to recognize the new Bolshevik government and thus did not invite its representatives to the Peace Conference.

Fourteen Points Intended To Guarantee Fair Agreement

The Allies also excluded the defeated Central Powers — Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria. This infuriated the German representatives, who had requested the armistice on the assumption that Wilson’s Fourteen Points would be maintained. The Fourteen Points were a series of measures elaborated by Wilson to guarantee a fair peace agreement. They included the promise that all involved powers would go through the same level of disarmament, or reducing the number of weapons they had. They also included the respect of national borders. Yet, at the urging of the French and British, the Treaty of Versailles subjected Germany to measures that were much more strict.
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. Alsace and Lorraine were returned to France. German territories were transferred to Belgium and Denmark, while Poland was given independence and a land corridor to the Baltic Sea, separating East Prussia from the rest of Germany.

**Germany Agrees To Pay Financial Reparations**

The Treaty limited the size of the German army and navy, and allowed for the trial of Kaiser Wilhelm II and a number of other high-ranking German officials as war criminals. Under the terms of Article 231 of the Treaty, the Germans accepted responsibility for the war and agreed to pay financial reparations to the Allies. The Inter-Allied Commission determined the amount and presented its findings in 1921. The amount they determined was 132 billion gold Reichmarks, or $32 billion U.S., on top of the initial $5 billion payment demanded by the Treaty.
The harsh conditions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles met with bitter opposition from 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, "We 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. ... We were aghast when we read in documents the demands made upon us." Germany was "cut in pieces and weakened" but still forced to "bear all the war expenses of her enemies, which would exceed many times over the total amount of German state and private assets. ... No limit is fixed, save the capacity of the German people for payment ... The reconstruction of our economic life is at the same time rendered impossible ... Thus must a whole people sign ... its own death sentence."
Paving Way For Hitler

In the years that followed, the Allies would at first attempt to enforce the original terms. However, the Treaty underwent multiple revisions, often in the form of concessions to Germany. Meanwhile, German remilitarization and resentment helped pave the way for the rising Nazi party of Adolf Hitler.

Critics of the Treaty came from both sides, including that of the winning nations. In 1919, the British economist John Maynard Keynes wrote the following in his book "The Economic Consequences of the Peace:"

"Moved by insane ideas and reckless self-regard, the German people overturned the foundations on which we all lived and built. But the spokesmen of the French and British peoples have run the risk of completing the ruin ..."

"In this lies the destructive significance of the Peace of Paris. If the European civil war is to end with France and Italy abusing their momentary victorious power to destroy Germany and Austria-Hungary now prostrate, they invite their own destruction also, being so deeply and inextricably intertwined with their victims by hidden psychic and economic bonds."