During World War I many people spoke of the conflict as the “war to end all wars.” They hoped that the war would serve as a brutal lesson. Then future bloodshed might be avoided. But the seeds of future conflict were already being sowed.

The Peace of Paris

In January 1919, the Allied Powers held a conference in Paris to arrange peace terms. On June 28, 1919, they signed the Treaty of Versailles with Germany. Separate peace treaties later were signed with Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey. All the treaties together are known as the Peace of Paris.

The Treaty of Versailles

The Versailles Treaty established the League of Nations. This international organization was the vision of U.S. president Woodrow Wilson. To Wilson’s great disappointment, however, the United States Senate later refused to ratify the treaty. Thus the United States did not participate in the League.

Under the terms of the peace treaty, Germany was forced to accept sole responsibility for the war. Germany lost all its colonies and some of its own territory. France regained Alsace-Lorraine. Part of the Rhineland was placed under Allied occupation. The German army was limited to 100,000 men. And the German navy was limited to a small number of warships. Germany was required to pay reparations of billions of dollars. Much of the country's economic resources were turned over to the Allies.

Other Treaties

World War I destroyed the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1919, Austria signed the Treaty of Saint-Germain. It recognized the independence of Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, and Hungary. Other portions of the empire went to Italy and Romania. The other Central Powers also signed separate treaties. Hungary signed the Treaty of Trianon, and Bulgaria the Treaty of Neuilly, in 1919. Turkey signed the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920.

The Paris treaties did not bring world peace, however. Wars continued in eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Russia and Poland fought a border war. The Turks fought to drive out Greek and other Allied troops. Rebellions and civil wars erupted in parts of the Middle East.

Nationality and Democracy
Broad recognition of the principle of nationality was a major consequence of the war. For the first time, almost every people in Europe was able to establish an independent state. Minorities often ended up on the wrong side of national borders. But the borders closely followed the lines of language and nationality. Several parts of the former Russian Empire became independent. They included Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The countries carved from Austria-Hungary reflected the peoples of that former empire. Most of the frontier lines in the Balkans were also new.

The war also brought about sweeping changes in government. After the war a democratic form of government was adopted in Germany. Most of the countries of central and eastern Europe also set up democratic governments. By the 1930s, however, this experiment in democracy had failed. The failure was largely because Europe had never recovered from the terrible losses of the war.

**The Costs of the War**

The war had left the nations of Europe exhausted and poverty-striken. France and Britain owed tremendous war debts. Germany was close to economic collapse. And it was burdened with war reparations that it could not pay.

The war had almost completely destroyed the European economic system. A brief recovery took place in the 1920s. But it depended on American loans. The loans dried up as a result of the Great Depression in the 1930s. European prosperity then collapsed.

Apart from the war’s material destruction, the human losses could never be made good. More than 8 million soldiers and 6.6 million civilians died. Many millions more had been wounded.

**The Postwar Mood**

During the war politicians had spoken of the great days to come. There would be no more wars and no more want, they said.

The postwar reality was different. Few people coming of age in the 1920s and 1930s could understand why the war had been fought. A widespread sense of disillusionment was reflected in various ways. In the United States people turned away from participation in European affairs. In Europe class barriers began to break down. Pacifist movements gained strength.

So did movements such as fascism, which glorified war and dictatorship. Italians turned to Benito Mussolini, whose fascist regime boasted of suppressing civil liberties. And the Germans turned to a man who promised to avenge their defeat—Adolf Hitler. Within twenty years of the Treaty of Versailles, another world war would darken Europe.

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