

The Paris Peace Conference (1919) To Finish with the First World War

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ABSTRACT

The first diplomatic gathering to bring together so many countries from all continents, the Paris Peace Conference was tasked with bringing the First World War to a diplomatic end. Faced with unprecedented difficulties, the Allies initially met without the enemies. After difficulties in establishing the organisation of the Conference, the Council of Four helped accelerate the future peace, even if numerous oppositions weakened the assembly on multiple occasions. Judging that the resulting peace did not respect the Pre-Armistice Agreement, which was the basis for peace, the vanquished experienced the treaties as a humiliation. The historiography today tends to distance itself from the Keynesian vision of the conference, and to consider the novel elements developed by the decision-makers of the peace of 1919-1920.



William Orpen, Signature du traité de Versailles dans la grande galerie, 1919

The Paris Peace Conference, the first diplomatic gathering to bring together so many countries from all continents (twenty-seven nations, four British Dominions and India), was tasked with bringing the First World War to a diplomatic end. The conference opened on January 18, 1919 and completed its work on January 21, 1920, before transforming into an itinerant inter-Allied conference (London, San Remo, Lympe, etc.) and the Conference of Ambassadors located in Paris. The conference's programme was the largest ever known, for unlike the Congress of Vienna in 1815, everything had to be reconstructed. With the fall of the great empires, European borders had to be redrawn, and economic and commercial channels recreated. The food situation and political instability resulting from the Bolshevik Revolution were also constant worries for the "peacemakers" (M. MacMillan), along with their concern for making the structures permanent thanks to a collective security organization.

A Conference Without the Vanquished?

Unlike previous conferences, only the delegations of the Allied and Associated Powers were initially present. They met in a Council of Ten that included the heads of government and foreign ministers of the five “powers with general interests” (France, United Kingdom, United States, Italy and, with ambassadors, Japan). The Council proved unwieldy in its organization and was unable to help the “Great Powers” complete the discussions in January-March 1919. There is no doubt that Wilson, the first American president to visit Europe, where he enjoyed extraordinary popularity, was able to promote discussion of the Covenant of the League of Nations (LN), and to include it in the future treaties. Nevertheless, the discussions of the Council of Ten were marked by the absence of decisions, and by long hearings in which representatives of states aspiring to international recognition presented their requirements. These were then referred to territorial commissions in which different types of experts (geographers, military representatives, economists, historians, etc.) proposed borders for insertion in the treaties. At the end of March, only the military clauses of the future peace had been decided: no military service in Germany, an army limited to 100,000 men, no armoured forces or aircraft, and a demilitarization of the left bank of the Rhine. The impatience of public opinion and the precarious situation in Central Europe (Béla Kun’s rise to power in Hungary) forced Allied and Associated leaders to change their methods.

The Inter-Allied Crisis (March-May 1919)

At the end of March, Lloyd George and his advisors drafted the famous Fontainebleau memorandum intended to warn his counterparts about the dangers of too hard a peace with respect to Germany. He also enjoined his colleagues to meet in a select group for more discretion and effectiveness. The Council of Four brought together Wilson, Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Orlando, and met twice daily, almost without interruption, from March 24 to June 28, 1919. It was this governing body that decided the essence of the clauses in the future treaty with Germany, whereas the Austrian or Bulgarian matters were left to the Council of Five, bringing together the foreign ministers and the Japanese representative. It was also within this Council of Four that divisions among the Allies erupted: in late March Wilson strongly opposed the French claims over the Saar expressed by Clemenceau. He likewise attempted to block the extensive definition of reparations presented to him by Lloyd George, who strangely did not include this aspect in his notion of moderation towards Berlin. During a decisive week in early April 1919, the break between the Europeans and the Americans threatened the conference itself on multiple occasions. The American president even prepared his ship, the *George Washington*, for a potential early return to the United States. However by mid-April, the substance of the Rhine compromise along with the agreement regarding the status of the Saar had been concluded: Clemenceau obtained a fifteen-year occupation of the left bank of the Rhine, in exchange for the promise of an early withdrawal in the event of Germany’s correct application of the treaty. On the other hand, Germany’s unwillingness could be punished by prolongation of the occupation period. Clemenceau also obtained a treaty of guarantee from the Anglo-Saxon powers in case of a German attack, as well as ownership over the Saar mines under an international territorial regime, also for fifteen years.

Just as France was securing its claims, the Italian crisis once again threatened the conference. The Italian representatives Orlando and Sonnino, who were committed to the letter of the Treaty of London of 1915, and who wished to annex Fiume, were forced to leave the conference in the face of American intransigence. It was at this exact moment when the German enemy arrived at Versailles.

A Fragile Basis for Peace and its Representation

On November 5, 1918, after an exchange of memoranda between the Americans and Germans, the Allies accepted, in a contractual approach with the Germans, to base the future peace on the foundation of Wilson’s Fourteen Points and on his speeches given in 1918, with two reservations (the point on freedom of the seas was

refused, and the principle of reparations was more affirmed). The German delegation, led by Brockdorff-Rantzau, saw the treaty clauses presented on May 7, 1919 as humiliating measures, and violations of this "Pre-Armistice Agreement". In addition to the loss of territories (Alsace-Lorraine, Schleswig, Province of Posen and the Danzig corridor, colonies) and the signing of a "blank check" for reparations, the Germans criticized the "*Schmachparagrafen*" ("articles of shame") that pronounced the judgment of Wilhelm II for a "supreme offence against international morality and the sanctity of treaties" (especially the violation of Belgian neutrality in 1914, despite it being guaranteed by an international agreement). Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, which formulated the legal foundation for the reparations that Germany had accepted to pay, was also seen in Berlin (contrary to its real meaning and its finality) as a moral condemnation, and as a guilty verdict to be assumed for the war. The prohibition of *Anschluss* was received as a violation of the right of peoples.

The absence of oral negotiations with the Allies, of freedom of movement for the German delegation, and the signing of the treaty on June 28, 1919 in the Galerie des Glaces all contributed to making the treaty into a *Diktat* for German opinion.

After June, the Allies continued to prepare the other treaties under the leadership of the Council of Heads of Delegations: that of Saint Germain signed on September 10 with Austria, which reduced the country to its germanophone sections; and that of Neuilly signed on November 27 with Bulgaria, which deprived it of Western Thrace and parts of Macedonia.

In the wake of Keynes's work, the Paris Peace Conference was long interpreted as the founding event of a Carthaginian peace, although today both French and Anglo-Saxon historiography tend to be less harsh with respect to the conference and its actors, who had to make compromises and take into account opinions brought to fever pitch by the war. There is also a tendency to highlight the dynamics of treaty clauses and the novel aspects of the Versailles order, which also made it into a new phase for international law through the LN, the ILO (International Labour Organization) and minority rights.

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