

The Paris Peace Conference



What happens when a war is finished? Does everyone just go home and go back to what they were doing before the war? What happens to the countries that have been defeated? What happens to the lands that have been destroyed by the fighting? What happens to the conflicts that still haven't been settled between the two sides? Should something be done to prevent another war from beginning?

At the end of World War I, President Wilson and the leaders of the other victorious countries decided to meet and make some important decisions about issues like these. Their meeting was called the Paris Peace Conference. It began in January 1919 and lasted for months.

The conference took place in a palace called Versailles, just outside of Paris, France. It was a large conference, and lots of different meetings took place during the conference. The main meetings took place in a large, beautiful room called the Hall of Mirrors. The Hall of Mirrors had 70 windows, and across from the row of windows there was a row of mirrors that reflected the view. Green marble pillars added to the formal look of the room.

Representatives from 32 countries took part in the conference. The countries that were defeated in the war, including Germany, were not invited to participate and were only permitted to come when it was time for them to sign the treaties that were prepared by the Allies. Some countries only were allowed one representative, and others were allowed more. The United States and the other major powers from the war had five representatives. When all of the countries met at once it was called a Plenary Session, and all of the members voted. Many

decisions, however, were made by a smaller group of only the most powerful countries. This group was called the Supreme Council. Even among the Supreme Council, some countries had more power than others did. Four countries, known as the Big Four, dominated the decision-making.

The Big Four countries were the United States, Great Britain, France, and Italy. They were represented by President Wilson of the United States, Prime Minister David Lloyd George of Great Britain, Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau of France, and Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando of Italy. Each of these leaders wanted to settle the problems caused by the war, but each one also wanted what seemed best for his own country.

President Wilson had already outlined his plan, which was known as his Fourteen Points. His plan called for breaking up the large empires, settling the conflicting claims for land, and establishing a League of Nations to settle future conflicts in order to prevent future wars. It did not call for punishments for the losing countries. Back in the United States, some people disagreed with Wilson's idea of a League of Nations because they feared that any type of alliance could eventually get us involved in another conflict. Instead, these people wanted to keep us out of European affairs all together.

The three European Prime Ministers had a different view of what should happen at the peace conference too. Their countries had been more directly involved in the war than the United States, since the war had been fought in Europe. Much of their land had been ruined, their cities had been destroyed, and innocent citizens in their countries had been killed. They wanted to make sure that Germany never became powerful enough to invade their countries again. Many of the people in their countries felt that Germany, and the other Central Powers, should pay for the billions of dollars in damages caused by the war. Many people felt that the Central Powers should be punished for going to war. Once the conference began, there would be plenty of issues to discuss, and many decisions to make.