

The Paris Peace Conference and its Consequences

By [Alan Sharp](#)

This article offers an overview of peacemaking after the First World War from the armistices of 1918 until 1923. It considers the outcomes of the five Parisian treaties (Versailles, Saint-Germain and Neuilly in 1919 and Trianon and Sèvres in 1920) together with the renegotiated settlement with Turkey at Lausanne in 1923. It analyzes the organization of the conference and the aims and ambitions of the leading personalities involved, concluding with an appraisal of reparations, self-determination and the reputation of the settlements.

Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 From War to Peace?](#)
- [3 The Paris Peace Conference](#)
- [4 A New World Order?](#)
- [5 Reparations](#)
- [6 National Self-Determination](#)
- [7 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

In April 1919 British Prime Minister [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#) compared peacemaking in Paris with the 1815 post-Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars negotiations: "You then had to settle the affairs of Europe alone. It took eleven months. But the problems at the Congress of Vienna, great as they were, sink into insignificance compared with those which we have had to attempt to settle at the Paris Conference. It is not one continent that is engaged – every continent is engaged."^[1] The peacemakers faced an awesome task. They had to deal not only with the problems that had caused the war, but also with the further complications occasioned and exacerbated by it, when the bitterness of loss and destruction was still raw.

The [human toll](#) was staggering. Around 9.5 million young servicemen died. Three or four times as many were wounded, some of whom would never work again, and each a reminder of the personal and financial cost of the conflict. Millions more died in the inter- and intra-state wars that continued after 1918. Others remained unborn because of wartime separations. The British Treasury estimated that victory cost an astronomical 24 billion British pounds (in 1914 gold values) whilst the effects on world trading patterns and economic power were extensive and long-lasting. [America](#), a pre-war debtor nation, emerged as the world's largest creditor and its major industrial producer. In [France](#) and [Belgium](#) an area the size of Holland was devastated. Much was repaired by the mid-1920s, but the legacy of human sacrifice and lethal debris continues to be unearthed a century later.^[2]

Peacemaking proceeded in stages. The Paris Conference ran from 18 January 1919 until 21 January 1920. Its main forum was initially the Council of Ten – the heads of government and foreign ministers of [America](#), [Britain](#), [France](#) and [Italy](#), as well as two Japanese representatives. After March 1919 this group divided. The Council of Four – Prime Ministers Lloyd George of Britain, ^{\$}The Paris Peace Conference and its Consequences (Version 1.1) - 1914-1918-Online

Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929) of France, Vittorio Orlando (1860-1952) of Italy and American President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) – became the main decision-making body until the German treaty was signed. Their respective foreign ministers – Arthur Balfour (1848-1930), Stephen Pichon (1857-1933), Sidney Sonnino (1847-1922) and Robert Lansing (1864-1928), together with Baron Makino Nobuaki (1861-1949) of Japan - became the Council of Five, which undertook much of the detailed work on the new frontiers of Europe and the treaty with Austria, referring sensitive decisions to the Four. On 28 June 1919 Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles, the first and most significant of the five Parisian treaties.

After June 1919 and the departure, first of Orlando, then of Lloyd George and Wilson, the Five became the main body of the conference, gradually changing composition as the foreign ministers were replaced by their ambassadors or officials. They oversaw the signature of the Treaties of Saint-Germain with Austria on 10 September 1919, and Neuilly with Bulgaria on 27 November 1919. In January 1920, prompted by Lloyd George's concern that Clemenceau was exercising too much power, the Paris Conference closed. The finalisation of the treaties of Trianon with Hungary, signed on 4 June 1920, and of Sèvres with the Ottoman Empire on 10 August 1920, together with increasing problems of enforcement, were handled with some confusion by peripatetic meetings of Allied heads of government held in various capitals and spas. The concluding stage of peacemaking, following the collapse of Sèvres, witnessed the only real negotiations with a former Central Power, ending with the Treaty of Lausanne with Turkey on 24 July 1923.^[3] Peacemaking had thus taken longer than the war itself, whilst the process might be compared to the spasmodic assembly of a complicated jigsaw puzzle, whose pieces were produced at different times and by separate hands, creating its solution from a combination of intention and circumstance.

From War to Peace?

On 28 June 1914 Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este (1863-1914), heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his wife were assassinated at Sarajevo. Within six weeks all the European great powers, excepting Italy, were at war. It was not the short decisive encounter expected but in 1918 its equally rapid denouement took the victors by surprise. After final German assaults from March to June 1918 and the pressure on all the belligerents becoming critical, the tide turned inexorably in August 1918. The Central Powers collapsed. First Bulgaria accepted an armistice on 29 September 1918, then the Ottomans and Austria-Hungary began negotiations leading to their respective armistices on 30 October 1918 and 3 November 1918. On 4 October 1918 Germany sent a telegram to Washington via Switzerland requesting Wilson to negotiate a settlement based on his 8 January 1918 "Fourteen Points" speech to Congress.^[4]

Wilson demanded additional conditions from his other 1918 speeches – notably the "Four Principles" (11 February), the "Four Ends" (4 July) and the "Five Particulars" (27 September). He also demanded regime change in Germany, where he would negotiate only with a responsible government. His "program for the peace of the world" endorsed the calls for a "new diplomacy" to replace the secretive methods of the aristocratic European elite that many radicals blamed for the catastrophe. He demanded "open covenants of peace openly arrived at"; the free use of international waters for trade by neutrals in wartime; the removal of barriers to free trade; the reduction of armaments to "the lowest point consistent with domestic safety"; and "a free, open-minded and absolutely impartial" colonial settlement. He required the evacuation and restoration of all territories occupied by the Central Powers in Russia, Belgium, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro. France should regain Alsace-Lorraine, Italy's frontiers be redrawn "upon clearly recognizable lines of nationality", an independent state of Poland erected, and autonomy granted for the peoples of Austria-Hungary and the non-Turkish peoples of the Ottoman Empire, without destroying Austria-Hungary or depriving the Turks of their national territory. Finally he called for a League of Nations offering "mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small States alike."

His later speeches demanded an end to "the great game, now forever discredited, of the Balance of Power", the satisfaction of "all well-defined national aspirations" (with the caveat that these should not create or continue antagonisms likely to disturb the peace), and "a fair and just and honest peace...in which the strong and the weak shall fare alike." He promised there should be "no...contributions, no punitive damages..." and claimed: "These great objects can be put into a single sentence. What we seek is the reign of law, based upon the consent of the governed and sustained by the organized opinion of mankind."^[5]

Only on 8 October 1918 did he inform his European associates whose cryptographers had, in any case, broken the Swiss codes. They resented this approach to a newcomer to their ranks. "Have you ever been asked by President Wilson whether you accept the Fourteen Points? I have never been asked", Clemenceau inquired. "I have not been asked either", replied Lloyd George.^[6]

They had little choice but to accept, though they could have no complaint on the military terms of the armistice which Wilson left

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to the Allied commanders. Their crippling conditions amounted to surrender. As Germany's leaders discovered the following June, there was no possibility that they could renew hostilities. They believed, however, that their 5 November 1918 pre-armistice agreement with the Allies guaranteed that the treaty would be based upon Wilson's principles.^[7]

The Allies committed themselves to creating a new mechanism for international diplomacy, to conforming to higher moral standards than any previous peace settlement, and to the delicate task of reconciling reality to Wilson's eloquent but imprecise expositions of liberal values. Could Wilson's promise of secure access to the Baltic to an independent Poland, made up of indisputably Polish populations be delivered and yet maintain the principle of self-determination? The definition of "indisputably Polish populations" was already problematic, but Danzig – the obvious port – was – equally obviously – German, whilst the ethnic composition of the lands needed for a "corridor" from the Polish heartland to Danzig was mixed. Here, as with the Saar coalfields, giving the League sovereignty provided a useful mechanism to reconcile the conflicting principles.^[8] Wilson's points offered opportunities to his colleagues to exploit their imprecisions and for the Germans to cry foul if they were not satisfied.

The armistice with Germany on 11 November 1918 completed the suspension of hostilities between the Allies and the Central Powers but conflict continued. Lansing recorded in his diary for 22 January 1919, "all the races of Central Europe and the Balkans in fact are actually fighting or about to fight with one another...the Great War seems to have split up into a lot of little wars."^[9] There were armed struggles in the Balkans, Poland was in conflict with its neighbours, and [civil war in Russia](#) between the Bolsheviks and various White Russian armies was further complicated by the aspirations of national independence movements in the former Tsarist empire.

Wilson expected resistance from his colleagues in Paris, but he was also aware of another threat. In Russia the overthrow of the Romanovs in February 1917 was followed by the [October Bolshevik coup](#) giving [Vladimir Ilyich Lenin \(1870-1924\)](#) and his comrades' control of Moscow and Petrograd and, despite their precarious position, the chance to proselytise a revolutionary alternative to Wilson's reformist liberal capitalist vision. Although Lenin had pragmatically sacrificed territory for the survival of his new regime in the [Brest-Litovsk Treaty](#) with Germany in March 1918 and made hinted offers to the Allies to extend trade and other opportunities in return for the withdrawal of their various interventionist forces in 1919, many doubted whether co-existence represented his real objective.^[10] Russia as a state might be impotent but the ideological challenge of communism, preaching class war, world revolution, anti-colonialism and its own version of self-determination represented a persistent, if shadowy, threat to the peacemakers, especially at a time of enormous uncertainty in eastern Europe.^[11]

Despite such distractions Germany was the priority for the peacemakers. Yet it took more than two months after the armistice before the conference opened, partly delayed by a general election in Britain in which Lloyd George sought to turn victory into political capital to consolidate his position as the Liberal leader of a predominantly Conservative coalition. This he did on 14 December 1918, but the popular perception that his government would secure massive German payments to offset the costs of the war and bring the ex-German Emperor Wilhelm II to trial and execution, represented hostages to fortune.

Meanwhile Wilson, for whom the mid-term elections had given his rival Republicans control of the Senate, wished to address Congress on 2 December 1918 before he departed for Europe, where he was determined to be America's main negotiator. Clemenceau hoped that, given time, a more federal Germany might emerge, and accompanied by his bitter rival, French President [Raymond Poincaré \(1860-1934\)](#), celebrated the triumphant return of Lorraine and Alsace, lost in 1871, with visits on 8 and 9 December 1918. Christmas and the New Year intervened and, although all were aware of the enormous task before them, it was difficult to refocus immediately. In the inevitable relaxation of tension some key decision-makers fell ill during a virulent influenza epidemic, its spread aided by the massive wartime movement of people and goods, which proved a far greater killer than the war itself.^[12]

The Paris Peace Conference

Wilson arrived in Europe to scenes of adulation in Paris, London and Rome and the various delegations gathered. On Saturday, 18 January 1919, Poincaré opened the conference, frustrated that this formal role marked the limit of his involvement. The date marked the anniversary of the German Empire's proclamation in 1871 in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, which Clemenceau reserved for the treaty's signature. Paris was itself a controversial choice. Wilson rejected Switzerland, fearing the country was "saturated with every kind of poisonous element and open to every hostile element in Europe", leaving Lloyd George powerless

to resist Clemenceau: "I never wanted to hold the Conference in his bloody capital...but the old man wept and protested so much that we gave way."^[13] Paris could facilitate such a massive conference but the atmosphere in a city so recently menaced by German arms was hardly conducive to moderation or generosity.

The French proposed on 29 November 1918 that peacemaking should follow the pattern established in 1814-15. At that time the Treaty of Paris settled the immediate issues relating to France and its former enemies before they joined smaller states and former neutrals at the Congress of Vienna to consider the settlement's wider aspects. The French presupposed an Allied dictation of terms to Germany and then a broader gathering to tackle more general questions. The League was last on their agenda – a move hardly likely to endear the suggestion to Wilson, especially when they stated the Fourteen Points were "not sufficiently defined in their character to be taken as a basis for a concrete settlement of the war." The plan was disregarded and no alternative advanced.^[14]

Thus the conference opened without a clear agenda, with the German peace terms, the wider aspects of the European and world settlement and questions like the League all under consideration. The resulting confusion was reflected by [Paul Cambon \(1843-1924\)](#), France's veteran ambassador to London, who lamented: "No matter how hard you try, you cannot imagine the shambles, the chaos, the incoherence, the ignorance here." His brother, [Jules Cambon \(1845-1935\)](#), predicted after the opening ceremony, that the result would be "*une improvisation*" (an improvisation).^[15]

The lack of a considered policy meant that the various commissions to establish the Allies' terms assumed that there would be negotiations with the Germans and thus gave themselves room for later concessions by making maximum demands. Their discussions emphasised the differences between them and, recalling the havoc wrought between the victors in 1815 by the wily French diplomat, [Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord \(1754-1838\)](#), the Allies gradually and tacitly accepted that they would not negotiate directly with the Germans, but their original terms often entered the treaty unaltered. The British diplomat [Harold Nicolson \(1886-1968\)](#) reflected: "Had it been known from the outset that no negotiations would ever take place with the enemy, it is certain that many of the less reasonable clauses of the Treaty would never have been inserted."^[16]

Wilson's principles presupposed equality between states but peacemaking was dominated by the great powers, with the remainder of the thirty-two countries confined to a meaningless formal role in the Plenary Conference, which met only nine times. The Council of Ten proved indecisive and unwieldy and wasted much time listening to the interminable speeches of the smaller powers' representatives outlining their incompatible demands. After a month little progress had been made beyond a first draft of the Covenant of the League of Nations and agreement that Germany forfeit its colonies, though the expert commissions were considering their recommendations.

The leaders also had domestic responsibilities as they sought to manage the transition from war to peace. On 14 February 1919 Wilson departed for Washington for a month. Lloyd George was absent until 5 March 1919, whilst on 19 February 1919, Clemenceau survived an assassination attempt. When Wilson returned in mid-March 1919 a tangle of unresolved problems threatened to overwhelm the conference: Germany's responsibility to redress Allied losses; its eastern and western frontiers; Italian claims to [Fiume](#); Polish claims to Danzig and Anglo-French differences in the Middle East. The threat of Bolshevism and revolution emphasised the need for decisions. The Council of Ten had not lacked diligence; it had met seventy-two times, initially twice, more recently once a day, and established fifty-eight subcommittees; but it had not reached conclusions.^[17]

Its replacement, the Council of Four, evolved from informal and wide-ranging meetings in early March 1919 between the resilient Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Wilson. Orlando joined them from 24 March 1919. Initially with only Professor [Paul Mantoux \(1877-1956\)](#) in attendance as interpreter, in early April they recruited the British cabinet secretary, Sir [Maurice Hankey \(1877-1963\)](#), to record their decisions and offer his support to meetings that continued to tackle issues on an *ad hoc* basis.

The current view of the Council – indeed of the whole conference – has been heavily coloured by [John Maynard Keynes's \(1883-1946\)](#) coruscating attack in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, one of the most influential polemics of the 20th century. Keynes, a British Treasury expert in Paris, published his book in December 1919, only six months after leaving the conference in despair. His brilliant and cruel pen-portraits of Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Wilson (he ignored Orlando) and his seductive reduction of the complexities of peacemaking to what was decided by four men in Wilson's "hot, dry room" have shaped much of the subsequent debate on the settlement.

He portrayed Wilson as a ponderous Presbyterian bamboozled by Lloyd George, the "Welsh Wizard", and bullied by

Clemenceau, the formidable "Tiger", into betraying his principles and creating a "Carthaginian peace", intent on ruining Germany as effectively as Rome had destroyed Carthage in 146 BC. While neither true, nor certainly a full account of how the settlement was reached – much of which was determined by the Council of Five – nonetheless the "Big Four" did confront the contentious issues.^[18]

They had differing objectives and aspirations. Wilson insisted that the Covenant of the League of Nations be the first priority and its twenty-six articles the first chapter of all the Paris treaties. He sought to avoid the precipitate rush to war of 1914 by introducing delaying mechanisms before any state could legitimately resort to arms. His original draft included an automatic sanction of war against any member that broke its covenants but the dictates of national sovereignty undermined this revolutionary commitment by all members to defend their mutual political independence and territorial integrity against unprovoked aggression. Instead League members could choose their response to such occurrences, thus rendering dubious the notion of collective security. The League's problem lay in the gap between the expectations of the public that it could avert another great war and the reluctance of politicians to trust an untried experiment. Clemenceau spoke for many when he declared, "There is an old system of alliances called the Balance of Power – this system of alliances, which I do not renounce, will be my guiding thought at the Peace Conference."^[19] Nonetheless the conference found the League helpful in side-stepping the principle of self-determination to provide France with coal from the Saar and Poland with the use of Danzig as a port without awarding either state sovereignty over the respective inhabitants. It was also passed responsibility for minority protection for some national groups left on the wrong side of the new frontiers.^[20]

Wilson exhorted his colleagues on his voyage to Europe, "Tell me what is right and I will fight for it."^[21] He knew, however, that his speeches had created undeliverable expectations – subjects of the European empires for whom his words had not been intended, anticipated self-determination as eagerly as aspiring nations in Europe, many of which he had been unaware. Acknowledging that "the hungry expect us to feed them, the roofless look to us for shelter, the sick of heart and body depend on us for cure", he feared "a tragedy of disappointment", a foreboding that cannot have been eased by his messianic welcomes in Europe.^[22]

The quick-witted and silver-tongued Lloyd George, who shared Wilson's Gladstonian liberal legacy, but who was more adept at trimming his principles, wanted a stable European continent, freeing Britain to pursue trade and its imperial role. He sought a treaty which would inflict stern justice but without alienating the Germans unnecessarily, especially by assigning too many to foreign rule. He wished, for sentimental as well as pragmatic motives, to create a new major British sphere of interest in the Middle East, an important source of the oil on which the Royal Navy now depended. He was willing to back the Dominion premiers in their quests to control neighbouring former German colonies – though, as he warned Australian Premier Billy Hughes (1862-1952), not to the extent of quarrelling with the United States over the Solomon Islands. He was determined that Britain should receive as much as possible of any German reparation payments, employing all his considerable political and linguistic skills in this pursuit. He was also adamant, against domestic and foreign opposition, that the former Kaiser should be brought to trial. He enjoyed greater support to extend international law beyond prosecuting persons accused of wartime operational crimes to include arraignments of those responsible for the political and military decisions which had occasioned the war and the manner in which it had been fought.^[23]

In 1915 Britain, France and Russia made extravagant promises in the Treaty of London to secure Italian intervention in the war. Orlando's aim, in the face of disappointment at Italy's war record, the fear that Germany might unite with the rump of Austria, and Wilson's inconvenient predilection for national self-determination, was to secure as much of this bargain as possible. He was successful in moving the Italian frontier to the Brenner with the acquisition of South Tyrol from Austria, which consigned some 250,000 German-speakers to Italian rule. Italy made further gains in Trieste, Trentino and Dalmatia but its additional demand for the Adriatic port of Fiume met Wilson's adamant opposition. In protest Orlando quit the conference in late April 1919, returning, without concessions, in early May 1919. This cost Italy its hopes of occupying Izmir (Smyrna) but its absence also forced Wilson to accept, against his own convictions, Japan's claims to Germany's former Chinese colonies when it too threatened withdrawal.^[24]

For seventy-seven year old Clemenceau, who had twice seen France invaded by a more populous and powerful Germany, security was key. *Père-la-Victoire* (Old Man Victory) sought this in a number of ways. The French favoured a League with the military capability to enforce the settlement on Germany but Anglo-American opposition scotched this. Clemenceau aimed to weaken Germany: whether by the cession of territory to Poland, Denmark or detaching the Saar and Rhineland; the reduction of

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Germany's massive armed forces; or by reparations payments, which would hamper its rearmament and assist France repair its ruined provinces. Clemenceau was further anxious to preserve and extend the alliance with Britain and the United States that had been vital to France's victory, and, more speculatively, depending upon the outcome of events in Russia, to rediscover an ally or allies to the east of Germany which could help keep it in check. He had no faith in Wilson's just settlement: "You want to do justice to the Germans. Do not imagine that they will ever forgive us; they will seek only the chance to obtain revenge."^[25]

The offer of Anglo-American support should Germany launch an unprovoked attack upon France, together with an agreement to occupy the Rhineland for fifteen years and to demilitarize it permanently, persuaded Clemenceau to drop his demands for its separation from Germany. This eased the log-jam of problems and, on 7 May 1919, the Germans received the draft treaty.^[26] Their attempts to negotiate by correspondence, after forensically dissecting its clauses, failed. Lloyd George, however, prompted by disquiet in the British delegation, sought amendments, much to Wilson's disgust and Clemenceau's apprehension. He secured a plebiscite on the fate of Upper Silesia but little else. On 22 June 1919, the German government was given an ultimatum – agree to sign within twenty-four hours or face war. They capitulated.^[27]

Germany lost Alsace-Lorraine to France, [Eupen and Malmedy](#) to Belgium, northern Schleswig to Denmark, Danzig to the League, and the Polish corridor (which split East and West Prussia), Posen and half of Upper Silesia to Poland, and, eventually, Memel to Lithuania. France was awarded the Saar coal mines, with the territory ceded for fifteen years to the League, after which a plebiscite would determine its destiny. The Rhineland was demilitarized permanently and occupied by the Allies for fifteen years. Germany's losses amounted to over 6.5 million people and 27,000 square miles of land, (10 percent and 13 percent, respectively, of its pre-war resources). It was forbidden union with the rump state of Austria. Germany's forces were restricted to an army of 100,000 long-term volunteers and a tiny navy of 15,000 men without [submarines](#) or [dreadnoughts](#). It was forbidden an air force, heavy [artillery](#), [tanks](#), poison gas and a general staff. It was obligated to deliver as yet unnamed "war criminals" and as yet unspecified reparations to the victors. Its overseas empire of over 1 million square miles was surrendered to the League for redistribution under mandates – a rather thin veneer for an imperial carve-up.^[28]

A New World Order?

It was a very different world to that of 1914. The United States made decisive interventions in the war and peacemaking, but this reversal of a century-old tradition of non-involvement in European affairs now seemed a temporary lapse after the Senate's refusal to ratify the Treaty of Versailles. The British Dominions, their identities tempered by war, expected greater autonomy, whilst Irish nationalists sought independence. Four great empires that for centuries had dominated eastern and central Europe and the Middle East had collapsed. In November 1918 [Charles I, Emperor of Austria \(1887-1922\)](#) withdrew as his empire disintegrated whilst Germany became a republic after [Wilhelm II, German Emperor's \(1859-1941\)](#) abdication, though unlike the Romanovs, the Habsburg and Hohenzollern royal families survived. The Ottoman Empire, shorn of its Middle Eastern territories, continued to exist, at least nominally, until, after a rebellion and a successful campaign against the occupying Greek forces, [Mustafa Kemal \(1881-1938\)](#) expelled the Sultan and created the new secular state of Turkey in 1922.^[29]

The Russian revolutions created a dilemma that the peacemakers never resolved. [James Headlam-Morley \(1863-1929\)](#), a British expert in Paris, observed: "In the discussions everything inevitably leads up to Russia. Then there is a discursive discussion; it is agreed that the point at issue cannot be determined until the general policy on Russia has been settled; having agreed on this, instead of settling it, they pass on to some other subject."^[30] After an abortive attempt to assemble the warring factions for negotiations on the Prinkipo Islands in the Sea of Marmara, the peace conference dismissed one-sixth of the earth's surface in Articles 292 and 293 of the Treaty of Versailles. Only later, and with great reluctance, did other states acknowledge the existence of the Soviet Union and the new Baltic nations.^[31]

In Europe thousands of miles of new frontiers came into existence. As far east as Germany's boundaries with Poland the peacemakers could decide. Beyond that, deprived of any reliable means of enforcing their will, the new map depended more upon the outcome of wars and armed struggles – as the Chief of the British Imperial General Staff, Sir [Henry Wilson \(1864-1922\)](#), observed, "The root of evil is that the *Paris writ does not run*."^[32]

The Balkans changed significantly with Austria, Hungary and Turkey the main losers. The major winner was [Yugoslavia](#) (technically, until 1929, the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes). In 1914 Serbia had 33,900 square miles and

4,600,000 people; Yugoslavia by 1921 had 101,250 square miles and a population of 13,635,000.^[33] Greece increased from 42,000 square miles and 4,800,000 people in 1914 to (at least temporarily) 60,000 square miles and 7,500,000 inhabitants by 1921.^[34] Romania more than doubled its pre-war size and population from 53,661 square miles and 7,500,000 people to 113,941 square miles and 16,000,000 people.^[35] Bulgaria, whose hopes of territorial gain (however unrealistic for a defeated power) were disappointed, emerged with 45,000 square miles of territory and a population of 5,200,000 compared to 47,750 square miles and 5,500,000 people in 1914. Its loss of Western Thrace to Greece deprived it of access to the Aegean and, proportionate to its size and wealth, it faced the highest reparations bill of all the Central Powers.^[36]

The settlement consolidated the Balkans but fragmented Eastern Europe. Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria and Hungary, together with the Soviet Union, filled the political vacuum left by the collapsed empires. Hungary, which lost two-thirds of its pre-war territory and 58 percent of its population, suffered the heaviest deprivations of any of the defeated powers, losing a third of its Magyar people. Austria reluctantly became an independent state, its population of 8 million mostly in or near Vienna, a city deprived of its *raison d'être* as the imperial governmental, financial and banking centre.^[37]

Poles, as subjects of the three empires that had partitioned Poland in the 18th century, fought on both sides during the war, and Poland's independence rested upon the unlikely outcome that Russia and its enemies, Austria-Hungary and Germany, would all lose. When this happened reborn Poland's ambitions were not modest, reclaiming lands lost in the fourteenth century, but Lloyd George, in particular, fought to limit German losses in Upper Silesia and on the fringes of the Polish corridor. After the 1920 war with Russia, Poland established this new frontier far to the east of the Curzon line recommended by the conference, creating a state where only 69 percent of the population was Polish and whose neighbours all had grievances against it.^[38]

Czechoslovakia, based upon the ancient kingdom of Bohemia, with the addition of Slovakia and Moravia, owed much to the efforts of two men, Tomáš Masaryk (1850-1937), whose father was Slovak, and Eduard Beneš (1884-1948), a Czech. Both proselytised hard in exile, eventually gaining Allied endorsement in 1918. Masaryk's hopes of cooperation with Poland were dashed by a dispute over the coal-rich duchy of Teschen. The fate of 3 million German-speaking former subjects of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to whom Germany laid claim, caused the peacemakers much disquiet. Torn between the principles of self-determination and the need to offer Czechoslovakia secure frontiers and economic prosperity, they allocated the area to the Czechs. Romania and Hungary also had disputes with Czechoslovakia, typical of the problems that prevented the new states from cooperating. Yet, if they did not hang together, should Germany, or Russia, or both, revive, they were likely to hang separately.^[39]

The peacemakers neglected the abject Ottomans throughout 1919, only drafting the terms of Sèvres in London and San Remo in the spring of 1920, by which time conditions were much altered. Sèvres recognised an independent state of Armenia, imposed strict military restrictions on Turkey, established international control over the Straits and awarded spheres of influence in Anatolia to Italy and France, whilst Greece was given most of Thrace and the opportunity to govern Izmir for five years before a plebiscite decided its fate. The Sultan signed under duress but Kemal's revolt was growing and in 1921 his forces halted the Greeks at the Battle of Sakarya. He then drove them back with increasing speed in 1922, culminating in a massacre at Izmir on 9 September 1922 and a stand-off with a small British force at Chanak, where war was averted by a combination of luck and good sense.

From 20 November 1922 to 4 February 1923 and again from 19 April until 24 July 1923 there were negotiations at Lausanne between Kemal's representatives and the Allies, for whom the British Foreign Secretary, George Curzon (1859-1925), and later the High Commissioner at Constantinople, Sir Horace Rumbold (1869-1941), armed with little else except the secret intelligence gleaned from decoded Turkish communications, played a weak hand well. The new treaty returned Eastern Thrace, Anatolia, Izmir and some of the Aegean islands to Turkey, all the financial and extraterritorial privileges previously enjoyed by the powers were scrapped and there was no mention of Armenia, whose independence Turkey had effectively destroyed in December 1920. The Treaty of Lausanne proved to be the longest-lasting of the post-war settlements, testimony to the virtues of negotiation between participants willing to work within the same parameters and accept the need for compromise.^[40]

Elsewhere the shape of the modern Middle East, fashioned by a combination of European imperialism and rivalries between local powers, emerged from the collapsed Ottoman Empire. Mesopotamia (now Iraq), Transjordan (Jordan), Syria and

Lebanon were shared between Britain and France as mandates with Transjordan originally being a part of the Palestine mandate, whilst the Hejaz (Saudi Arabia) became independent. Palestine, the subject of Britain's own ambitions and conflicting commitments to Arabs and Zionists – the twice or thrice promised land – became an enduring problem. Under the British mandate (1920-1948) increasing numbers of Jewish immigrants, anxious to claim their "National Home", clashed with the indigenous Arab population in the interwar period, whilst the violent birth of the state of Israel in 1948 created a Palestinian refugee problem and a clash of territorial interests which remain unresolved.^[41] In Asia, Japan consolidated its position as a major regional power at the expense of [China](#), where disappointment and frustration led to a huge demonstration in Beijing against foreign intervention on 4 May 1919.^[42]

Two areas of the settlements were particularly controversial, offering a rich source for opponents seeking hypocrisy and double-dealing. According to the American banker, [Thomas Lamont \(1870-1948\)](#), "The subject of reparations caused more trouble, contention, hard feeling and delay at the Paris Peace Conference than any other point of the Treaty."^[43] Yet applying the principle of self-determination ran it very close, as the need to achieve economic viability, defensible frontiers, administrative convenience and efficient communications encountered the ethnic hotch-potch of eastern and central Europe. Both subjects raised expectations that were impossible to satisfy.

Reparations

Keynes (and many subsequent writers) condemned the reparations settlement. In wartime speeches Wilson and Lloyd George had ruled out seeking an indemnity (the full repayment of war costs). The pre-armistice agreement limited liability to "all damage done to the civilian population of the Allies and their property by the aggression of Germany by land, by sea, and from the air" (reparations). This suggested Belgium and France would receive most of the payments since Britain had suffered little direct damage and the Dominions none. Hughes objected vociferously and Lloyd George's sincerity towards the pre-armistice agreement (despite his painstaking draftsmanship) has been questioned.^[44]

In Paris, with Clemenceau and Lloyd George now adamant that they were entitled to full compensation and Wilson insistent that they were not, a crisis loomed. It was "solved" by a classic short-term fix replete with unintended consequences – Articles 231 and 232 of the treaty – which asserted the Allied moral right to compensation from Germany (and its allies) for all their losses because Germany (and its allies) were responsible for the war. Accepting that Germany could not meet the full bill, they limited their actual claims in an Annex to certain categories of civilian damage but, at Britain's insistence, these included the costs of pensions and allowances paid to servicemen and their families. Wilson acceded to the dubious argument that service personnel were merely civilians in uniform, hoping to create a fairer basis for the distribution of an anticipated fixed German payment to discharge all its debts.^[45]

The Four could not agree on such a sum, instead setting up a Reparation Commission to make recommendations in 1921. When it did the inclusion of pensions theoretically nearly doubled Germany's liabilities but, equally, most of its demand for £6.6 billion was "phoney money" – window dressing to mollify Allied public opinion. Of the three series of bonds Germany was to issue, over £4 billion were C bonds which no one believed would be paid. Its real debt, under the A and B bonds, was therefore about £2.5 billion, well within British and American estimates of its capacity to pay.

Early attempts to persuade Germany to comply culminated in the Franco-Belgian [invasion of the Ruhr](#) in 1923. After Poincaré abandoned this adventure, the Americans led two attempts to create workable schedules of payments, in the Dawes (1924) and Young (1929) Plans. Germany defaulted on its reparation liabilities in 1932, after paying about £1.1 billion including deliveries in kind. Meanwhile, between 1924 and 1930, foreign investors, mostly American, lent it about £1.27 billion, most of which [Adolf Hitler \(1889-1945\)](#) refused to repay, prompting a suggestion of American "reparations" to Germany.^[46]

Faced, unlike Germany, with heavy reconstruction costs and sizeable external debts of £3.7 billion, of which £2.96 billion was owed to the United States,^[47] the Allies suggested an all-round cancellation of inter-allied debt in return for reducing Germany's liabilities. The Americans rejected the argument that some had paid for victory with blood and others with treasure. President [Calvin Coolidge's \(1872-1933\)](#) response was typically laconic: "Well, they hired the money, didn't they?"

Inter-allied debts and reparations contributed to the financial and economic tangles of the 1920s that culminated in the Great Depression after Wall Street crashed in October 1929.^[48] German nationalists exploited their interpretation of an exclusive

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responsibility for the war (which Article 231 did not assert) to good effect in their struggle against the treaty. Everyone agreed that some compensation was due but the weight of public expectations made it impossible to find a mutually acceptable figure and the Allies marred their case for redress by their Jesuitical behaviour.^[49]

National Self-Determination

The hope that national self-determination would create a secure and contented Eastern Europe in place of the former multinational empires was soon dashed. The French predicted that German revisionism would begin here and the region's instability and bitterness helped to poison post-war international relations. All the new states were dissatisfied with their frontiers, whilst the ethnic kaleidoscope resulting from centuries of wars, migrations and inter-marriage meant that none was a truly national entity, each containing minorities that were resented and feared. The peacemakers did establish a system of protection for these minorities, partly to encourage their assimilation and partly to avoid their supplying neighbouring kin-states with an excuse to disrupt the new order. But then they washed their hands, passing responsibility to the League. Hitler's exploitation of the Sudetenland Germans in his 1938 dismantling of Czechoslovakia represented the nightmare they sought to avoid, whilst Balfour's sardonic comment summarises the insoluble nature of the problems: "General [Edward A. Plunkett's \(1870-1926\)](#) solution of our eastern European difficulties is that we should put the whole area in charge of a genius. We have no genius's [sic] available."^[50]

Self-determination had implications far beyond Europe. "What effect," asked Lansing, "will it have on the Irish, the Indians, the Egyptians and the nationalists among the Boers? Will it not breed discontent, disorder and rebellion?"^[51] He was correct, not least because the Europeans had dealt their own image of moral superiority a terrible blow in four years of brutal warfare. A sustained post-war insurgency campaign by the Irish Republican Army against British Crown forces led in 1920 to the partition of [Ireland](#) into the Irish Free State in the south whilst in the north six of the nine counties of historic Ulster remained part of the United Kingdom. The Indian National Congress, originally established to promote dialogue with Britain, was already pressing for home rule before the war, radicalised by Curzon's attempt to partition Bengal. Now led by [Mohandas Gandhi \(1869-1948\)](#), frustrated in its efforts to gain recognition in Paris and dismayed by the Rowlatt Bills and the [Armritsar massacre](#), it initiated the first of a series of non-cooperation campaigns to encourage Britain to quit [India](#). In Egypt three years of widespread anti-British violence began in March 1919, before Britain imposed partial independence in 1922, under which it retained control of defence and the Suez Canal. France, with a quarter of its inter-war army based in North Africa, struggled until 1926 to suppress the Rif revolt in Morocco, led by [Abd el-Krim \(1882-1963\)](#), whose guerrilla tactics influenced [Ho Chi Minh \(1890-1969\)](#), [Mao Zedong \(1893-1976\)](#) and [Che Guevera \(1928-1967\)](#). Meanwhile in [Indochina](#), Ho Chi Minh, who had unsuccessfully tried to submit the Vietnamese national case to the Paris conference, exploited the growing resentment against French colonial rule in the 1930s. As Lansing had predicted, self-determination was a phrase "simply loaded with dynamite" and, once detonated, the explosion was impossible to contain.^[52]

Conclusion

Nicolson was typical of many Anglo-American participants when he declared, "We came to Paris convinced that the new order was about to be established; we left it convinced that the old order had merely fouled the new."^[53] This harsh judgement has been echoed by many subsequent historians, though the release of governmental archives from the 1960s onwards and recognition that the contemporary record of tackling ethnic nationalism and ideological extremism has not been brilliant, has prompted some more sympathetic appraisals.^[54]

The peacemakers knew their main responsibility was to integrate Germany into an international framework permitting it appropriate power and influence without overwhelming its neighbours. They hoped a democratic Germany, accepting its defeat, would concede that the settlement was just and execute the treaty. Yet in November 1918, with clear German victory in the east and its troops [still occupying Northern France and Belgium](#), defeat was a difficult concept to grasp and it is arguable that no treaty based on such a premise would ever have been acceptable to Germany, even had the Allies been more amenable to negotiation.

Britain and France were left to execute a settlement that the Americans had heavily influenced but now reneged upon. Britain favoured modifying the terms in the hope of reconciling Germany, France preferred rigid enforcement to nullify German power.

As a result they veered between conciliation and coercion, effectively stymying both policies, contributing, in part, to an outcome in 1939 that neither wanted. Yet the responsibility for this new catastrophe cannot be attributed to the peacemakers alone as they sought to remedy the ills that drove Europe to war in 1914. The settlements they reached were not perfect and contained potential seeds of further conflict but also offered the hope for a better future. Lloyd George, in October 1922, was the last of the Four to leave office. Much would depend on how their successors interpreted and implemented their legacy.

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Notes

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3. ↑ Marston, F.S.: *The Peace Conference of 1919. Organisation and Procedure*, Oxford 1944; Sharp, Alan: *The Versailles Settlement. Peacemaking After the First World War, 1919-1923*, Basingstoke 2008, pp. 19-41.
4. ↑ Stevenson, David: *With Our Backs to the Wall. Victory and Defeat in 1918*, London 2011, pp. 30-169 and *passim* demonstrates the enormous problems faced by all the belligerents.
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6. ↑ Seymour, Charles (ed.): *The Intimate Papers of Colonel House*, vol. IV, London 1928, p. 167.
7. ↑ Lowry, Bullitt: *Armistice 1918*, Ohio 1996, pp. 117-46 and *passim*.
8. ↑ Sharp, Versailles 2008, pp. 128-31 and 121-24.
9. ↑ Perman, David: *The Shaping of the Czechoslovak State*, Leiden 1962, p. 105.
10. ↑ The British diplomat, Sir [Esmé Howard \(1863-1939\)](#), suggested, "...no real peace with him can be hoped for. Any peace he and the Bolshevik leaders made with us will only be like Brest-Litovsk to gain breathing time. Otherwise it is war to the knife, underground if not above it." See: Debo, Richard K.: *Survival and Consolidation. The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia 1918-1921*, Montreal 1992, p. 36.
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16. ↑ Nicolson, *Peacemaking* 1933, p. 100.
17. ↑ Sharp, Versailles 2008, pp. 28f.
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20. ↑ Henig, Ruth: *The League of Nations*, London 2010, *passim*.
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30. ↑ Headlam-Morley, James: A Memoir of the Paris Peace Conference 1919, London 1972, pp. 7f.
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