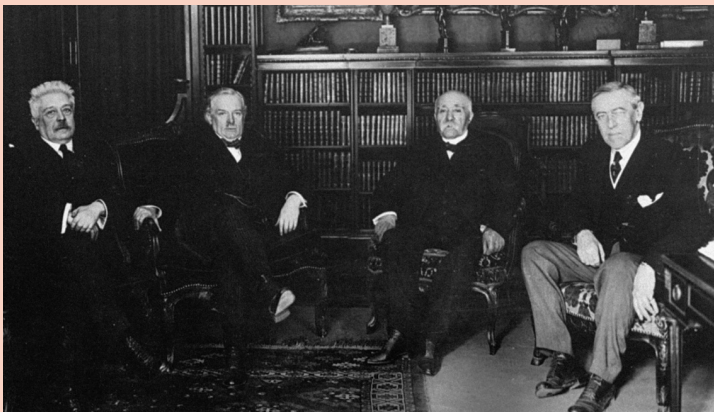


# Paris Peace Conference 1919–20

**Events:** In the aftermath of WWI, representatives of the Allies (the leading figures were President Wilson (see p. 445) of the USA, Clemenceau, the Prime Minister of France, and Lloyd George, the UK Prime Minister) met in Paris in January 1919 to arrange a peace treaty with Germany. The result of this was the Treaty of Versailles, signed in June 1919, with a further series of treaties later being signed with the other defeated powers. Two main motivations lay behind these treaties. The first, articulated by Wilson and set out in his Fourteen Points (a peace programme announced in a speech to Congress in January 1918) was the desire to institute a new international order, achieved through a 'just peace' that would banish power politics for ever. This resulted in the redrawing of the map of central and eastern Europe in line with the principle of national self-determination, leading to the creation of new states such as Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Poland. Wilson's major contribution to the Versailles conference, however, was the creation of the League of Nations. However, the other major motivation, expressed in particular by Clemenceau, was to punish Germany and strengthen French security. This led to the large-scale disarmament of Germany, the loss of German territory and the distribution of its colonies as 'mandates' to various Allied powers, and the imposition of the 'war guilt' clause.



League of Nations stood by powerless to stop it. Liberal statesmen and theorists had ignored the most basic fact of international relations: as all states are ultimately driven by self-interest, only power can be a constraint on power; a reliance on law, morality and international institutions will be of no avail. The wider acceptance of such an analysis in the aftermath of WWII helped to assure the growing ascendancy of realist theories over liberal theories within the discipline of international relations.

On the other hand, liberal internationalists have pointed to the inconsistent application of liberal principles at the Paris Peace Conference. The Treaty of Versailles was never properly a 'liberal peace'. This was both because it left many nationalistic conflicts unresolved, and sometimes worsened (especially through the loss of German land to France and Czechoslovakia), and because, in important respects, the desire to punish and permanently weaken Germany took precedence over the quest for a just peace. Arguably, the seeds of WWII were thus sowed not by a reliance on 'utopian' principles, but by the fact that Versailles was in many ways a 'victors' peace'. The 'mistreatment' of the defeated stored up massive grievances that could only, over time, help to fuel hostile and aggressive foreign policies. What is more, the much vaunted League of Nations never lived up to its name, not least because of the refusal of the world's most powerful state, the USA, to enter. In that sense, the Paris Peace Conference produced the worst of all worlds: it strengthened the currents of power politics in Europe while persuading the victorious powers that power politics had been abolished.

**Significance:** Just twenty years after the Paris Peace Conference, the world was plunged once again into total warfare, WWII bringing even greater carnage and suffering than WWI. What had gone wrong? Why had the 'just peace' failed? These questions have deeply divided generations of international relations theorists. Taking their lead from E. H. Carr, realist theorists have often linked the outbreak of war in 1919 to the 'idealist' or 'utopian' ideas of the Paris peacemakers. By believing that WWI had been caused by an 'old order' of rampant militarism and multinational empires, they placed their faith in democracy, self-determination and international organizations. In particular, they had failed to recognize that power politics is not the cause of war but the major way in which war can be prevented. When Germany, blamed (with dubious fairness) for the outbreak of WWI, re-emerged as a major and ambitious military power, breaking, in the process, many of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, the