



Background

Plans for peace

It was only in October 1918 that the Allies (France, Britain, the USA and Italy) began to realise that they were winning the war. They began to make plans for the peace. They intended to hold a preliminary conference in Paris early in 1919. Here they would decide on the main issues that had to be resolved with Germany and its allies. They would then hold talks with the other important allied powers, especially Japan. Then they would discuss issues with smaller powers like Belgium and Serbia. Finally, the Big Four (President Wilson of the USA, David Lloyd George of Britain, Vittorio Orlando of Italy and Georges Clemenceau of France) would sit down with the Germans and negotiate a treaty.

This proved to be impossible. The issues were too complex. What actually happened was the Big Four were bombarded with petitions from all over the world. In the Middle East there were calls for the Arabs who had fought against the Turks to be given their own homeland. There was a similar call from Jews. In Eastern and Central Europe the many different nations that had belonged to the old Austro-Hungarian Empire wanted to rule themselves. The problem was that the populations of Eastern Europe were so mixed up that it was almost impossible to create, for example, a Poland with only Poles in or a Yugoslavia with no Germans in.

Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern and Central Europe were all terribly important issues. However, there was one issue above all others for Britain, France and the USA - what to do with Germany. From January to June of 1919, this issue dominated peace talks.

What did the USA want?

The views of President Wilson of the USA were based on his Fourteen Points:

1. No secret treaties
2. Free access to the seas in peacetime or wartime
3. Free trade between countries
4. All states to disarm to a reasonable level that would not threaten other states - this would reduce tension and reduce the risk of war
5. Colonies to have a say in their own future
6. German troops to leave Russia
7. Independence for Belgium
8. France to regain Alsace-Lorraine
9. The frontier between Austria and Italy to be adjusted
10. Self-determination for the peoples of Eastern Europe (they should rule themselves)
11. Serbia to have access to the sea
12. Self-determination for the people in the Turkish Empire
13. Poland to become an independent state with access to the sea
14. League of Nations to be set up

Wilson published these points in January 1918. In his opinion, they set out the basis of a better world in which future wars could be avoided. Historians have sometimes claimed that Wilson was in favour of a lenient peace that would not harm Germany and cause further resentment.



This is only partly true. Wilson certainly wanted a fair peace. He was worried that an unjust peace treaty would cause resentment in Germany and possibly even lead to a future war. However, he insisted that the treaty should punish Germany because he felt that Germany was responsible for the war. He also believed that it was pointless to cripple Germany and then get the Germans to pay reparations (compensation) for the damage caused in the war.

What did Britain want?

British Prime Minister David Lloyd George was not completely convinced by Wilson's Fourteen Points. He was probably right to point out that self-determination in Eastern Europe would be virtually impossible because the different nationalities who wanted to rule themselves did not live in neatly defined areas. Every country was likely to have at least one minority. Lloyd George was also not impressed with Wilson's demand for free access to the seas in peace or war. Britain's blockade of German trade had been a key factor in winning the war. Wilson's ideas would have made this impossible.

Despite these disagreements, both Wilson and Lloyd George wanted a peace treaty that would punish Germany, but would not cripple it. Lloyd George wanted Germany to recover its economic strength. This would enable Germany to pay its reparations to Britain. Also, Germany had been Britain's number two trading partner (after the USA) before the war. The war had created many new jobs in Britain, but now the war was over they would go. Lloyd George wanted to see new jobs created in companies that were selling goods to Germany. If Germany were crippled, that would mean unemployment in Britain as well.

Finally, Lloyd George was extremely concerned about what had happened in Russia. In 1917, the strain of war led to revolution in Russia. By early 1918, the Bolsheviks were in power. The Bolsheviks were Communists, led by Vladimir Lenin. They did not believe in Christianity. They did not believe in democracy. They did not believe in a free market for trading goods. They believed that there should be no bosses, only workers. Workers who owned property or wealth would be forced to give it up. These ideas appealed to the millions of poor and hungry people in Russia who felt that they had been exploited by the wealthy. These views were totally opposite to the views held by many people in Britain. Most British people were Christians, supported democracy and believed in people's rights to accumulate money and own property.

Lloyd George was concerned that if Germany were crippled, then this would cause misery and chaos. This in turn might make Germans turn to ideas like Communism. The obvious solution was to not cripple Germany. If Germans could see the chance of being prosperous again, then they would not be tempted to support Communism.

All these arguments made sense to Lloyd George, but he had two problems. One was the French leader Clemenceau (see below). The other was the opinion of British people. They wanted a harsh treaty that would punish Germany severely. In this difficult position Lloyd George was probably the ideal politician. He was clever, smooth, charming and a bit slippery. He had a track record of doing deals.



France

Georges Clemenceau led France at the Peace Conference. Clemenceau was a passionate and patriotic leader. Like most of his countrymen, he was extremely bitter about the damage and death that Germany had caused his country.

He looked at his country's recent history. Before 1871, there was no Germany, just a collection of states in central Europe. However, the biggest German state, Prussia, had united the German states into one empire in 1871. France had opposed this, but the Prussians defeated the French in a bitter war in 1870-1. The new Germany also forced France to pay compensation and took control of the province of Alsace-Lorraine. Most of the population of this area was French.

Clemenceau could also point to very recent history. As the German forces retreated through Belgium and France in the autumn of 1918, they destroyed factories, homes, schools, crops and livestock. In some areas they left a wasteland behind them.

Clemenceau also noted out that the Germans completely rejected Wilson's Fourteen Points when he announced them in January 1918. At that time, it looked as though the Germans might win the war as their armies were making tremendous advances on the Western Front. Germany had also signed a treaty with Bolshevik-led Russia in March 1918. In the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk the Germans took huge amounts of land and industrial equipment from Russia. They also forced Russia to pay a huge fine of 300 million roubles.

Clemenceau argued that the Germans would have done the same thing to Britain and France if they had won the war. He believed that France would never be safe unless Germany was crippled. In his view, Germany should be forced to pay large amounts in reparations to Belgium and France. Clemenceau also wanted Germany to be broken up into small states again and banned from re-uniting.

Clemenceau's problem was that he did not have the resources to achieve his aims. To split up Germany, he would have to invade across the Rhine and then occupy Germany. Germans would fight back. France did not have the troops, money or equipment to do this. Clemenceau would need the British and American forces and they did not share his views. He would have to use his political skills to get the harshest possible treaty.