



Arizona Model United Nations 64

Paris Peace Conference

Background Guide

Committee Introduction and Purview

The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 convened in the aftermath of the First World War, then commonly referred to as the Great War. The conflict began on July 28, 1914, driven by a combination of rising nationalism, competing national interests, and a complex system of military alliances among European powers. The immediate cause for war was the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria on June 28, 1914, in Sarajevo, though many would argue this conflict was inevitable.

Over the course of four years, World War I became one of the deadliest conflicts in human history. Advances in military technology, such as machine guns, artillery, chemical weapons, and trench warfare, led to unprecedented levels of death and destruction. The war resulted in an estimated 9 million military deaths and 6 million civilian deaths, caused by combat, atrocities, famine, and disease. By the war's end in November 1918, much of Europe was economically devastated, politically unstable, and socially fractured. Although many know about Russia's revolution, every major European power was nearing collapse.

The Paris Peace Conference

The Paris Peace Conference took place primarily throughout 1919, with negotiations continuing into 1920. The conference was attended almost exclusively by the victorious Allied powers; the defeated Central Powers were excluded from negotiations and instead presented with finalized treaty terms. A small number of neutral or newly formed states were invited to participate in limited capacities.

The conference resulted in five major peace treaties, most notably the Treaty of Versailles with Germany. It also led to the creation of the League of Nations, an international organization intended to promote collective security and prevent future wars. The treaties reshaped Europe and the Middle East by redrawing borders, transferring territory, imposing reparations, and establishing new political systems.

The decisions made at the conference contributed to the collapse of several empires, including the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire. The Russian Empire had already collapsed earlier and did not participate, having withdrawn from the war in 1918 following the Russian Revolution.

Although many nations were represented, the negotiations were dominated by the leaders of the "Big Four": the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy. Smaller nations often had limited influence and were frequently compelled to align with the priorities of these major powers. Each delegation pursued its own national interests while also advocating for a vision of a stable post-war international order. The United States emphasized self-determination, while France and Italy were more

hawkish, seeking to destroy the Central Powers, with Italy in particular looking to maximize its territorial gains. Britain was more neutral than France or Italy, but was still greatly motivated by territorial and economic gains.

Topic I: War Guilt and the Punishment of the Central Powers

One of the most controversial outcomes of the Paris Peace Conference was the assignment of war guilt. The treaties, particularly the Treaty of Versailles, placed primary responsibility for the war on Germany and its allies. Germany was required to accept blame for the conflict, significantly reduce its military forces, and pay substantial reparations to the Allied powers.

Delegates differed sharply in their views on punishment. Countries that had suffered extensive destruction, such as France and Belgium, generally supported harsh penalties to ensure security and compensation. Others argued that excessive punishment would destabilize Europe, foster resentment, and increase the likelihood of future conflict.

Questions to Consider

- Should responsibility for the war be assigned to a single nation, multiple states, or broader systemic causes?
- Should punishment be limited to financial reparations, or should it also include territorial losses and military restrictions?
- How might the severity of these punishments impact Europe's long-term political and economic stability?

Topic II: Border Changes and the Creation of New Nation-States

The end of World War I brought about the dissolution of several multiethnic empires, leading to widespread territorial reorganization. New nation-states such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia emerged from former imperial lands. These changes were often justified by the principle of self-determination, though strategic and political interests frequently took precedence.

Numerous territorial disputes arose from these border adjustments, including conflicts over the Polish Corridor and Danzig, the Sudetenland, South Tyrol, and Alsace-Lorraine. Outside of Europe, the mandate system was established, placing former German and Ottoman colonies under the temporary administration of Allied powers.

Questions to Consider

- How should former colonies and mandated territories be distributed among the Allied powers?
- Should borders be drawn primarily based on ethnic self-determination or strategic considerations?
- Which territorial adjustments should your delegation support or oppose, and why?

Topic III: Minority Rights and Nationality Laws

The creation of new states and the redrawing of borders left millions of people as ethnic or religious minorities within unfamiliar political systems. Many delegates expressed concern that unresolved minority issues could lead to future instability, especially given that ethnic tensions within the Austro-Hungarian Empire had contributed to the outbreak of war.

Particular attention was given to the treatment of ethnic Germans living outside Germany, as well as other minority groups across Central and Eastern Europe. The League of Nations was proposed as a possible mechanism for monitoring and enforcing minority protections, though its authority and effectiveness remained uncertain.

Questions to Consider

- Should minority rights be protected through international agreements or left to individual governments?
- How should conflicts between competing claims of ethnic self-determination be resolved?
- Should an international organization like the League of Nations have enforcement power over minority protections, and if so, to what extent?