



The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 took place following the first World War, then most commonly called the Great War. The war, which had begun on the 28th of July, 1914, started due to drastically differing national policies and rising nationalism, the complex web of alliances between the major European countries, and most famously: the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria on June 28, 1914 in Sarajevo. The resulting conflict resulted in 8 to 11 million military casualties and 5 to 8 million civilian casualties due to everything from military action, crimes against humanity, and malnutrition. Due to the technological advances of the time, this was one of the most deadly conflicts in world history in merely a 4 year span.

The Paris Peace Conference took place throughout 1919 and 1920. The conference notably excluded the defeated countries and was exclusively attended by members of the Allies and a few representatives who were invited from other countries. The conference concluded with five peace treaties being signed and the creation of the League of Nations. The peace treaties included provisions which transferred land, imposed reparations upon Germany, placed the blame of guilt for the war on Germany, and ultimately caused the collapse of three empires plus the Russian Empire who was not present at the conference due to pulling out of the war in 1918 following the Russian Revolution. While each delegate was responsible for representing their individual countries or colonies, they each had a unique goals for the conference; some were more significant than others but the delegates ultimately pushed for both their countries prosperity and their own vision of a post-war era. That being said, the conference was heavily dominated by the delegates of the “Big Four”—the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy—with smaller, less influential countries, typically going along with their goals.

Topic I: War Guilt and Central Powers’ Punishment

The treaties that resulted from the conference placed all war guilt on the German Empire along with demands of disarmament and significant monetary compensation. Delegates from different countries—largely affected by how damaging the war was to their people—varied on their beliefs for how severe the Central Powers should be punished.

Questions to consider:

1. How does your country/delegate view assigning war guilt—should it be collective or to a specific country?
2. Should reparations be limited to financial compensation or include territorial or military restrictions.
3. How might the severity of punishments affect the long-term stability in Europe?

Topic II: Border Changes and New Nation-States

The collapse of the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire were all caused by the war and decisions made during the peace conference. Many new countries including Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Poland were freed/created from the territories from the empires. There were also many disputed territories that delegates argued over including the Polish Corridor and Danzig, the Sudetenland, South Tyrol, and Alsace-Lorraine. The mandate system was also established to distribute and administer the colonies controlled by the German and Ottoman Empires.

Questions to consider:

1. How should colonies and mandates be distributed among the Allies?
2. Should new states be determined by the people or by strategic interests?
3. Which territorial adjustments does your country support or oppose?

Topic III: Minority Rights and Nationality Laws

There were concerns raised by many delegates about the rights of ethnic minority groups in the post-war countries. This issue was of heightened importance due to the mistreatment of minorities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire being one of the destabilizing factors that led to war. There were also concerns of the mistreatment of ethnic Germans in states that formed following the war.

Questions to consider:

1. Should minority rights be enforced internationally or left to individual states?
2. How should conflicting claims of ethnic self-determination be resolved?
3. Should an international body, such as a proposed League of Nations, be given authority to enforce minority protections, and if so, what?