

# Versailles and After

## 1919-1933

### **Introduction**

In January 1919 the leaders of thirty-two countries, representing between them some three-quarters of the world's population, assembled in Paris. Just two months previously, after four years of unremitting and savage conflict, an armistice had finally brought the First World War to its end. Now the politicians had to grapple with a whole range of problems thrown up by the war, and to thrash out the terms of a peace settlement. Their task was one of formidable complexity and difficulty, in view of the intractable nature of the issues to be resolved and the number of seemingly contradictory viewpoints and aspirations to be reconciled. In the circumstances, the settlement that emerged from the months of deliberation at Paris was a creditable achievement. The fact that it did not survive the 1920s intact stemmed, as we shall see, not so much from the terms of the peace treaties themselves but from the reluctance of political leaders in the inter-war period to enforce them.

### **Shaping the peace**

#### *Public opinion in the allied countries*

One of the most important factors influencing the shape of the peace settlement was the strength of popular feeling in Britain, Italy and, more

particularly, the countries invaded by German troops during the war: France and Belgium. To explain this, we need do no more than consider the unprecedented nature of the recent conflict. The First World War was fought on a scale, and at a cost in human suffering, unparalleled in the history of mankind. Countries from every continent, including most of those in Europe, had taken part. New weapons, such as aeroplanes, submarines and tanks, had widened the scope and sharpened the impact of warfare. Whole populations had been marshalled to serve their countries' war efforts. More than 10 million people had lost their lives, and millions more endured maiming, gassing, malnutrition, impoverishment or uprooting from their homes. Even as the delegates met at Paris, Europe lay in the grip of an influenza epidemic which claimed probably some 40 million lives and which unquestionably owed much of its devastating impact to the lowered resistance of its victims, stemming from the long years of the war. Such was the magnitude of the sacrifices which the principal protagonists had been called upon to make, and such was the closeness of civilian involvement in the struggle, that it was inevitable that emotions would run high. In Britain and France in particular, a strong current of opinion looked to the peace-makers to lay the blame for the war where it belonged, with Germany, and to exact punishment, including the surrender of territory, from the nation seen as being responsible for so much bloodshed and misery. There were many voices demanding that the Kaiser himself should be hanged. But alongside the call for retribution went the cry that never again should people have to endure the horrors of modern warfare. In France, this reinforced the demands for a punitive peace that would prevent Germany from waging war in the future. In Britain, however, some saw the prevention of future wars as a general problem that could only be tackled by the setting up of an international body to keep the peace.

Another demand which was strongly voiced was summed up in the words of the First Lord of the Admiralty, Eric Geddes: that the victorious allies should 'squeeze the German lemon until the pips squeak'. Economically, the impact of the war had been devastating. It is estimated to have cost in the region of £45,000 million, and had inflicted grave damage upon the leading industrial nations of Europe. Those who had been in-

volved in the fighting from the outset had been obliged to gear their economies to serve military needs, and had been forced to relinquish many of their lucrative overseas markets to their non-European competitors – notably to Japan, which played only a peripheral role in the fighting, and to the United States, which entered the war only in 1917. European countries which had managed to remain neutral during the war had suffered along with belligerent nations from the consequences of the crucial struggle for control of the seas, which involved German submarine attacks on merchant shipping and a British blockade of German ports. At the end of the war, the need to rebuild the economies of the leading European powers as swiftly as possible was widely recognized by economic experts and government officials, especially in Britain. But European governments had met the enormous costs of war largely by raising loans – from their own nationals, from bankers, and above all from American financiers. As hostilities dragged on, and as the amounts borrowed soared steeply, so the goal of victory had come increasingly to be associated with the prospect of redeeming those debts by the recouping of costs from the defeated enemy. Clearly, the demand for full reparations was not reconcilable with the desire for general economic reconstruction in Europe. Public opinion in Britain and France, however, whether motivated by sentiments of revenge or a conviction that reparations were no more than just, was firmly in favour of making Germany pay.

The popular press had developed during the war into a major influence on the formation of public opinion. With leading articles and features focusing on various war issues, often presented in grossly over-simplified terms, it played its part in raising the temperature of attitude and debate. It also ensured that the peace-makers at Paris, unlike their counterparts at Vienna a hundred years previously, or at Utrecht two hundred years before, had to negotiate in the full glare of publicity, knowing that details of their discussions would be carried the next day in newspaper columns throughout the world.

The presence in Paris of hundreds of journalists merely underlined the fact that the freedom of negotiation of allied leaders was circumscribed by their accountability to their electorates. The principal peace-makers were

aware that, as the leaders of democratic nations, they would have to answer for their decisions to their electorates. Indeed, Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, came to the Paris peace conference shortly after an election which left him in no doubt whatsoever as to the voters' wishes. The election campaign which began in Britain in November 1918 was the first since 1910, and the first to be conducted on the basis of full manhood suffrage and a limited franchise for women. Although Lloyd George was seen as the architect of victory, the deep split which had divided the Liberal ranks in the course of the war ensured that he was not in a sufficiently strong political position to go to the country on his own terms. Instead, he secured the support of the Conservatives and of a small section of the Labour party for the perpetuation of the war coalition and a policy of making Germany pay for the war. The large majorities by which Lloyd George's coalition supporters were returned to power in December demonstrated that this was exactly what the new mass electorate wanted. The campaign had been a heated one, with vociferous and widespread calls for a punitive settlement, and those candidates who had espoused the very different principles of the Wilsonian peace programme (see Appendix Two) had found great difficulty in making themselves heard.

If Lloyd George knew that his political future depended upon the maintenance of a hard line towards Germany, so too did the French Prime Minister, Clemenceau. After the war the French Chamber of Deputies was nicknamed 'the one-legged chamber' because of the number of maimed ex-soldiers it contained. These men would be satisfied with nothing less than a punitive peace, and they had a doughty champion in Marshal Foch, allied commander-in-chief during the final stages of the war, who was present at the Paris peace negotiations and could be relied upon to ensure that Clemenceau did not moderate his stance. Similar sentiments inspired the Italians, who looked to the peace treaties to give them the great territorial and economic gains which would compensate them for their heavy losses in the war and would make Italy at last into the great power they yearned for her to be. Orlando, the Italian Prime Minister, was well aware that if he failed to deliver the goods he would be charged with betrayal by more extreme nationalist elements seeking to expand their political influence.

### *Wartime treaties and commitments*

The case of Italy is a reminder that the peace-makers at Paris had also to take into account a number of commitments which had been entered into as a result of the heavy economic and military costs of the war. The more protracted the war, the larger was the number of secret diplomatic agreements entered into by the various participants. Sometimes the undertakings they embodied were in conflict with each other; more often, they involved the disposition of territory long in contention or the concession of economic advantage long coveted. When the full extent of the secret wartime diplomacy was revealed, and the beneficiaries called in their debts at the peace negotiations, much bitterness and argument ensued.

Italy was one such beneficiary. A pre-war ally of Germany and Austria-Hungary, she had not only declined to enter the war in their support but in May 1915 had agreed to join Britain, France and Russia against them. The price of her entry was set out in the secret Treaty of London, signed by all four nations on 26 April 1915. In addition to somewhat vague assurances that she would receive a 'just share' in any partition of the Ottoman empire and further territory if Britain and France annexed any German colonies, Italy was promised sovereignty over the Dodecanese islands (which she was already occupying) and major territorial gains at the expense of the Habsburg empire: to her north, the German-speaking Alpine regions of the Trentino and South Tyrol, and, across the Adriatic Sea, Istria and part of Dalmatia, both Slav-populated. If these specific promises materialized, almost a quarter of a million German-speaking Austrians and well over half a million Slavs and Turks would find themselves incorporated into the Italian kingdom. Such a transfer of populations would not only weaken Austria-Hungary very severely and threaten the establishment of a strong Serbia and a stable Albania; it would also run completely counter to any attempt to reorganize Europe after the war on lines of national self-determination. Lloyd George remarked ruefully of these Italian diplomatic gains that 'war plays havoc with the refinements of conscience'. Italy's presentation of her bill for payment at the end of the war was to pose major problems for the peace-makers.

The collapse of Tsarist Russia in 1917, and Bolshevik repudiation of the secret wartime agreements entered into, saved Britain and France from the

consequences of the most far-reaching commitment which they made, also in 1915, namely the promise to Russia of Constantinople and the Dardanelles Straits. Throughout the nineteenth century, Britain and France had striven to deny Russian ships access to the Mediterranean through this region. Wartime pressures forced a dramatic change of policy, but the Tsar did not survive long enough to claim his coveted prize. Other agreements relating to the Ottoman empire remained to be enforced or modified at the end of the war. In correspondence with the Sherif of Mecca in 1915 and early 1916, Britain's High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, had promised that Britain would recognize and support the independence of the Arabs in all regions demanded by the Sherif, save for the coastal strip west of the line Damascus-Hama-Homs- Aleppo and save for areas where Britain was not free to act without detriment to French interests. No specific mention was made of Palestine. The partition of the Ottoman empire was spelt out in more detail in an exchange of notes between Britain, France and Russia in 1916, referred to subsequently as the Sykes-Picot agreement. French and British spheres of influence were mapped out and Palestine was designated as an international sphere of influence. However, in 1917 the celebrated Balfour Declaration, issued by the British Foreign Secretary, promised a national home in Palestine for the Jewish people. In a further agreement, drawn up at St Jean de Maurienne in April 1917, Britain and France agreed to the establishment of an Italian sphere of influence in the region of Adalia and Smyrna. In July 1917 Greece entered the war on the allied side. It was clearly going to be difficult after the conclusion of the war to reconcile Italian ambitions with those of France and Greece in the Near East, or to adjudicate on the claims of Arabs and Jews in Palestine.

There were difficulties too concerning the Pacific and China. Germany had been in no position to defend her Pacific colonies or to maintain the territorial and economic rights in Shantung province on the Chinese mainland which she held as 'concessions'. Japan, which entered the war as an ally of Britain in August 1914, lost no time in seizing the German Pacific possessions north of the Equator. Subsequently, in a secret agreement of 1917, concluded at a moment when the British Admiralty was desperate

for Japanese naval assistance in the Mediterranean, she received an assurance of British support for her claims to these ex-German possessions, while herself promising to back British or Dominion claims to the German colonies already captured by Imperial troops south of the Equator. Furthermore, by the Twenty-One Demands of 1915 Japan had forced a weak and divided China to grant her, amongst other things, extensive economic and political privileges in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia and the right to dispose of German concessions in Shantung as she wished. The British had pledged support of her Shantung claims in the agreement of 1917 mentioned above, and in that same year the United States Secretary of State, Lansing, had guardedly acknowledged that 'special relations' existed between Japan, Shantung, southern Manchuria and eastern Mongolia, by virtue of their contiguity. However, the ruling warlord coalition in Peking, which itself declared war on Germany in August 1917, asserted that the Twenty-One Demands had no legal force since they had been signed by the Chinese government under duress. The problems arising out of these various claims were to lead to bitter disputes at the Paris peace conference.

#### *Russia and Germany*

The seizure of power in Russia by the Bolsheviks in November 1917 created a number of further difficulties for the peace-makers. The establishment of an avowedly workers' state, Bolshevik appeals to the proletarian classes in other European countries to rise up and challenge the capitalist order in a similar way, and Bolshevik slogans such as Trotsky's 'no annexations and no indemnities' were bound to cause alarm and even panic amongst the leaders of industrialized countries. Superimposed upon traditional fears of Russian imperialist ambitions was a new concern that the Bolshevik doctrines could subvert the existing social and political order in capitalist countries, which had been severely shaken by the impact of the war. Thus the Bolsheviks forced on to the agenda at Paris questions much wider than those anticipated before November 1917. Clearly, whatever territorial settlement was arrived at after the war would not be endorsed by Bolshevik Russia, whose leaders made no secret of the fact that they were out to destroy world capitalism, the imperialism it allegedly spawned, and the territorial strongholds through which it operated.

At the same time, Bolshevik weakness in the face of German military might in eastern Europe helped to shape the map of Europe after 1919. In March 1918 Bolshevik leaders had no alternative but to accept the draconian terms which Germany imposed upon them in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Not only did Moscow recognize the independence of Finland, the Ukraine and the Baltic states, but it also agreed to the redrawing of Russia's western frontier far to the east. As a result, large areas of Poland were freed from Russian rule, and the subsequent defeat of Germany and Austria-Hungary cleared the way for the reconstitution of an autonomous Polish state. The defeat of the Habsburgs also enabled the independent state of Czechoslovakia to be established. Other national and racial groupings clamoured for statehood, including Galicians, Ruthenians and Georgians. While the peace-makers pored over maps, the forces of the contending claimants to the western parts of the former Russian empire and of Habsburg territories battled it out in a series of direct military confrontations throughout 1919 and early 1920. The territorial arrangements which were eventually concluded owed as much to the outcome of these clashes as to the negotiations at Paris.

How was the perceived threat of Bolshevik Russia to the political and economic influence of western European nations to be met in the post-war years? Traditionally, the Habsburg dominions had stood as the west's bulwark against the danger of Russian expansion. In more recent times, as Habsburg power had waned, Berlin had come to replace Vienna. At the end of the war, however, neither was a feasible proposition. Germany, it is true, was far from the shattered hulk which she came to resemble in 1945. The end of hostilities had come about not as the result of a crushing allied victory in the field, but because it had become perfectly clear to Germany's military leaders that her allies were at breaking point and that the civilian effort necessary to sustain her armies could no longer be guaranteed. The High Command had consequently instructed the politicians to sue for peace on the best terms available. German troops, however, were still in occupation of parts of France, Belgium and the Baltic states, and began to return to their homeland only after the signing of the armistice. Germany remained a major political and economic unit in the heart of Europe. But there



could be no question of casting her as Europe's barrier-fortress against the Russians. Public opinion, on the contrary, demanded that she should suffer, and suffer heavily, through reductions in her territorial, military and economic strength. As for the Habsburg empire, this had already ceased to exist as an entity by the time the peace conference met, and its reconstitution was unthinkable, not least because of the strength of nationalist sentiment in its component regions, and the powerful patronage such sentiment enjoyed at Paris. Since no other solution presented itself, the problem was to be left unresolved. The difficulties which bedevilled international relations in the inter-war years stemmed in great measure from this power vacuum in eastern Europe.

### *The impact of the United States*

The entry into the war of the United States in 1917 was a mixed blessing for the western allies. Militarily, it more than compensated for the withdrawal of Russia, and convinced the Germans, after the failure of their 1918 spring offensive, that victory was no longer a possibility. Politically, however, it raised acute problems. President Wilson's views on the nature of the war and the shape of a peace settlement to follow differed radically from those of Britain and France. To Wilson, the outbreak of the war was tangible proof of the failure of traditional European diplomacy, based on balances of power, armed alliances and secret negotiations. What Wilson sought to construct was a more just and equitable system of international relations, based on clear principles of international law and centred on a universal association of nations working through agreed procedures to maintain world order. Wilson believed that the United States should take the lead in the creation of such a system, and should at the same time pursue a related goal, the extension of democracy throughout the world. He saw this as a moral commitment, entrusted to the American people and their leaders by the founding fathers, and already in 1916 he had proclaimed that the object of the war should be 'to make the world safe for democracy'. In that same year, his views were endorsed by American voters when, albeit by a narrow margin, he was re-elected president. In 1917, when unrestricted German submarine warfare and fears of subversion in Central America

drew the United States into the conflict, he seized his chance to use the great economic and naval strength built up by the United States during its years of neutrality to bring pressure upon Britain and France to follow the trail he had blazed. Territorial changes in Europe were of little concern to Wilson or the American people, who themselves faced no immediate military threat. America's entry into the war was portrayed as a crusade for a more just system of international relations, for the right of self-determination and for democracy, with the United States at the helm.

Wilson's peace aims were outlined in a number of speeches in 1917 and 1918, but the most succinct statement was contained in a carefully prepared address delivered to Congress on 8 January 1918, which is known as the 'Fourteen Points' speech because of the number of heads under which he itemized his peace programme. A summary of the contents of this speech is given in Appendix Two. Particularly important were the assertion that the national groupings within the Habsburg and Turkish empires should be given the opportunity of autonomous development, and the call for a general association of nations. In this speech, and his many others delivered in the course of 1918, Wilson sought to distance himself from his European allies and their traditional diplomatic dealings. (To this end, the United States entered the war not as an ally but as an Associated Power.) He also sought to reassure the weary civilian populations of Europe that the prize to be won by military victory would be a better world, and to win support in every quarter of the globe for his ideal of a peace based on principles of justice, equality and democracy. As he declared in ringing tones, 'peoples and provinces are not to be bartered about from sovereignty to sovereignty as if they were chattels and pawns in a game. . . '.

The British reaction to these pronouncements was somewhat muted. Balfour felt that the Fourteen Points were 'admirable but very abstract' and *The Times* that Wilson 'did not take into account certain hard realities of the situation'. The French concern was more with the successful prosecution of the war than with the details of a future settlement. Nevertheless, Wilson did achieve success in widening the scope of allied war aims. Initially limited to the restoration of Belgium and Serbia and the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France, by the closing stages of the war they

had come to include self-determination for Czechs, Poles, and other subject peoples in eastern and southeastern Europe, opening the straits to world shipping, and establishing the President's League of Nations.

When the Fourteen Points were first outlined, German newspapers were scathing, denouncing them as hypocritical, and aimed in reality at the achievement of 'Anglo-Saxon world hegemony'. As defeat loomed nearer, however, the German tune changed. Wilson's peace programme and general attitude appeared to promise some protection for Germany against punitive French and British demands. Accordingly, on 4 October 1918, the German government formally asked the President to take steps to bring about a ceasefire as a preliminary to the negotiation of peace terms on the basis of his address of 8 January and subsequent speeches. It was only at this point that Wilson sought the official support of the Entente governments for his peace programme. They were far from happy, Lloyd George objecting in particular to Point Two, which would rule out future naval blockades by Britain, and Clemenceau insisting that Germany's agreement to pay compensation 'for all the damage done to the civilian population of the Allies and their property by [her] aggression' be written in. The United States made it clear, however, that unless the allies toed the line, she would conclude a separate peace with Germany, and further objections were dropped. The Supreme War Council, which had co-ordinated the allied war effort, accordingly agreed to a peace settlement based on the Fourteen Points but taking account of the two specific reservations mentioned. They were somewhat reassured by Wilson's envoy, House, who told the allied leaders that the President 'had insisted on Germany accepting all his speeches, and from these you could establish almost any point that anyone wished against Germany'. On 5 November, Wilson informed the Germans of allied acceptance of his peace programme with the addition of the two reservations. He added that if they desired a suspension of hostilities on this basis, they should approach directly the allied military commanders in the field. On 9 November, the Kaiser, whose removal Wilson insisted upon as a precondition for the opening of the peace negotiations, abdicated. Just two days later, in Marshal Foch's railway carriage in the forest of Compiègne, the Germans signed an armistice agreement.

This armistice agreement was drawn up by allied and American military and naval commanders, and was therefore wholly unconnected with Wilson's peace programme on which the Germans had sued for peace. In practice, however, the armistice was bound to constitute an important element in later decision-making, and no leaders were more aware of this than the French. Having suffered German invasions in 1870 and 1914, they were determined to ensure the permanent weakening of their dangerous neighbour territorially, economically and militarily. Wilson's peace programme did not at first sight serve this purpose, but it might do so if linked with sufficiently stringent armistice terms. In fact, these were not as harsh as some, including American generals, wished. Fear that Germany might be provoked into fighting on, or that she might be left too weak to cope with Bolshevik-inspired uprisings, saw to that. Nevertheless, they were severe. German troops were immediately to withdraw beyond the Rhine; former German territory on the left bank was to be occupied; and a ten-mile-wide zone on the right bank, stretching from the Netherlands to the Swiss frontier, was to be neutralized. Allied and American garrisons were to be established at the three principal Rhine crossings and in thirty-mile-deep bridgeheads on the other side of the river. The Germans were also to be deprived of large quantities of war material, including all their submarines and much of their surface fleet, air force and transport. Finally, the blockade of Germany was to continue until peace terms had been settled and accepted.

Even before the armistice had been signed, however, Wilson's position at the forthcoming peace conference as the spokesman for American aims had been dealt a savage blow. In the mid-term elections, held on 5 November, his Republican opponents, who were strongly critical of his methods of conducting foreign policy and of the idealism of his peace programme, made sweeping gains which won them majorities in both Houses of Congress. Since any peace treaty to which the United States was a party would have to be submitted for detailed scrutiny to the Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate, now chaired by an uncompromisingly hostile Republican leader, Henry Cabot Lodge, and since it would then require approval by a two-thirds majority in the Senate, now Republican-controlled, the President's chances of gaining acceptance at home of any settlement he might negotiate

on the basis of his 'Fourteen Points' were seriously imperilled. When Woodrow Wilson set sail for Europe in December – the first President of the United States to travel overseas during his term of office – both he and the European leaders with whom he would have to negotiate were well aware that he no longer spoke authoritatively for his country.

## **Making the peace**

### *Organization*

Peace delegates and large numbers of their expert advisers began to assemble in Paris from the beginning of January 1919, though the first official meetings did not take place until the 12th. The Supreme War Council had already agreed that Britain, France, Italy and the United States would play a leading part in the proceedings, and that Japan should also be recognized as a leading allied power with general interests. What had not been settled, however, was the relationship between these five leading powers and the twenty-seven lesser allies who had specific interests in one or other aspect of the overall settlement (see Appendix One). The French government urged that major issues should be thrashed out privately between the five leading powers at sessions of the Supreme War Council. The resulting agreements could then be presented to the smaller powers for endorsement. Wilson, however, while not objecting to informal conversations amongst the leading representatives, believed that the conference itself, through plenary sessions of all its delegates, should formally initiate discussions and take final decisions. Otherwise, he feared that a small number of leaders would take the crucial decisions behind closed doors in the kind of secret diplomatic dealings he had so strenuously denounced in his wartime speeches.

Wilson managed to ensure that, in the early stages of the conference, the smaller powers participated in a wide range of general discussions through meetings of all official delegates, and through commissions set up by those meetings to consider items such as the establishment of a League of Nations, war guilt, reparations, and international labour legislation. At the same time, two representatives of each of the five leading powers met as a Council