Treaty of Versailles: Different Perspectives on a Lasting Peace

Delegates from 32 countries met for the Versailles Conference (January 1919), but most decisions were made by ‘the Big Three’ – Georges Clemenceau, Prime Minister of France, Woodrow Wilson, President of America, and David Lloyd George, Prime Minister of Britain. All three wanted to stop a war ever happening again, but they did not agree about how to do this; everybody wanted different things from the peace.

Many people genuinely wanted peace – they wanted the Great War to be ‘the war to end all wars’. Opening the Conference, the French President Poincaré said: ‘We are here to stop it happening again’. This was the most important thing for Woodrow Wilson. He wanted to make the world safe for democracy by making a fair and permanent peace. His Fourteen Points laid out what he wanted – including disarmament, a League of Nations (where countries could talk out their problems) and self-determination.

Source: [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/greatwar/g5/cs1/background.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/greatwar/g5/cs1/background.htm)
At the same time, many delegates felt anger and hatred. 1 million British and 1.5 million French people had been killed, much of north-eastern France and Belgium (the ‘Western Front’) had been destroyed. France and Britain were bankrupt. Most delegates blamed Germany (this feeling led to Clause 231) and wanted revenge for the ‘lost generation’; they wanted Germany crippled so the war could never be repeated. And if Germany was to blame for the war, then Germany should pay for the damage. So people wanted to ‘Make Germany Pay’ – as Sir Eric Geddes said, ‘everything that you can squeeze out of a lemon, and a bit more’. Many delegates thought it unfair that the Germans had taken vast amounts of land and people from Russia at the Treaty of Brest Litovsk (1917). They said that that the Treaty of Versailles should be just as tough on Germany.

This was what Clemenceau (nicknamed ‘the Tiger’) wanted – a Treaty to punish the Germans. He wanted to weaken Germany, so France would never be invaded again, by setting reparations high enough to destroy Germany’s economy, and by splitting up Germany so that the Rhineland was an independent country (and a barrier between Germany and France).

Lloyd George, too, said he wanted to ‘make Germany pay’ – but only because he knew that was what British people wanted to hear. He wanted ‘justice’, but he did not want the kind of ‘hard justice’ sought by France (which he thought would cause another war in 25 years time). Instead, he tried to get a ‘halfway point’ – a compromise between Wilson and Clemenceau. Like most delegates, Lloyd George wanted to use the Treaty of Versailles to get advantages for his own country. In particular, he wanted to get trade going again (this was why he did not want Germany destroyed economically).

France and Britain saw a chance to get more empire (they took over the German colonies as ‘mandates’). The Italians wanted the land promised to them (in a secret treaty) when they joined the allies’ side in 1915 (they were given Trentino and Trieste). Serbia wanted (and got) Bosnia.
**New Words**

Colonies: overseas countries ruled by a European nation

Disarmament: where countries agree to reduce their weapons.

Self-determination: the right of nations to rule themselves.

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**Clemenceau wanted...**

- **revenge** on Germany (as a defeated enemy).
- **punish** Germany (for the death and destruction caused by the German invasion of France).
- **make Germany pay** reparations (for the damage done to France).
- **weaken** Germany militarily (so France would never be in danger again).

**Lloyd George wanted...**

- a compromise between Clemenceau and Wilson
- **justice** - but not too harsh, and certainly not revenge.
- 'make Germany pay' - but not so much that trade would be damaged
- expand the **British Empire**
- maintain Britain's control of the seas
- increase British trade

**Woodrow Wilson...**

- Based on Wilson's 14 Points
- end war and make the world safe for democracy
- A fair peace, including:
  - self-determination
  - disarmament (to take away the tools for war)
  - the League of Nations (to provide a way to prevent war)

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What did the Big Three want from Versailles - and what did they get?

**Clemenceau got...**

- Huge reparations
- Tiny German army
- The demilitarised zone in the Rhineland
- Alsace-Lorraine and German colonies.

**BUT**

- He wanted the Treaty to be harsher
- He wanted Germany to be split up into smaller countries.

**Lloyd George got...**

- German colonies
- The small German navy

**BUT**

- He thought that the Treaty was far too harsh and would ruin Germany
- He said it would cause another war in 25 years time

**Woodrow Wilson got...**

- A League of Nations
- Self-determination for the peoples of Eastern Europe (eg Lithuania, Poland etc)

**BUT**

- Some of his ‘14 Points’ did not get into the Treaty (eg freedom of the seas/end of Empires)
- The US Senate refused to join the League or sign the Treaty

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Credit to: [http://www.johndclare.net/peace_treaties3.htm](http://www.johndclare.net/peace_treaties3.htm)