

Chapter 11

The Fourteen Points and the Versailles Treaty

President Woodrow Wilson reluctantly asked his countrymen to declare war on Germany in 1917, he told Congress that the 'world must be made safe for democracy.' The President did not want America to fight only to protect England and France so he called his nation to embark on a crusade 'to end all wars.' His Fourteen Points, announced in January 19, 1918, provided the blueprint to build the peace that would last for all time. They called for a peace treaty so fair and just that it would eliminate all need for future wars. The nations of the world would disarm themselves, renounce their colonial claims, eliminate tariff barriers, and engage in open and honest diplomacy. The map of Europe would be revised so that all major ethnic groups such as the Poles, Czechs, and Serbs, would each have their own nation, governed by and for themselves. Finally, a league of peace-loving nations would guarantee that the just provisions of this Treaty would be enforced by pledging themselves to protect one another from external attack by any aggressive country.

The collapse of Russia's armies during the autumn of 1917 and the communist revolution in November ended Russia's participation in World War I. As America hastily trained fresh troops to serve in France, Germany's armies launched a major offense. Fortunately, America's armies arrived in time to save the allies. The German attack was halted in July and in August and September, Germany retreated. When defeat seemed inevitable, many Germans were convinced that a peace based on the Fourteen Points was preferable to further losses. A revolution in 1918 overthrew the Emperor, and the new German government asked for a peace based on Wilson's program.

While the United States was committed to the Fourteen Points, neither England nor France had made similar assurances. "Wilson bores me with his Fourteen Points," France's Prime Minister George Clemenceau is said to have exclaimed, "God himself only had ten." Meanwhile, England's Lloyd George ran for re-election in 1918 with a promise to hang the Emperor and "squeeze the [German] lemon."

The final shape of the peace treaty that ended World War I was determined by the allies' different war aims. Some have criticized this peace as being too hard on Germany, others have claimed it was too easy. This chapter challenges its readers to resolve the problems confronted by the heads of the victorious nations that will last not for twenty years, but for twenty generations and longer. The information and instructions needed to meet this challenge are provided in this chapter.

The Setting

The scene was a railroad car outside of Paris, and the men gathered in it represented England, France, and Germany. The document which they drew up pledged Germany to: stop fighting; give up its weapons of war; leave all occupied lands immediately; disband its armies; and allow the allies several bridges by which to cross into Germany. This armistice was to take effect on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month (November 11, 1918).

The world on that November day was very different from the world of August 1914. Then, cheering crowds in the capitals of European cities proudly sent their young men off to battle. Four years later, dispirited bands of soldiers wearily sought their way home. In 1914, citizens who had known only peace looked optimistically toward the future. Later, the same people confronted a world that could only

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remember war and ached for respite. Ten million lives had been lost. Revolutions had swept the Tsar of Russia from his throne and had replaced him with a communist government under Vladimir Lenin. The German Emperor had been similarly deposed and replaced by a socialist government. The once proud Austrian-Hungarian Empire was split into the fragments of the ethnic groups it once ruled over, the Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Croats, Germans, Austrians, and Hungarians.

More than falling dynasties and emerging nations marked the new Europe. Everywhere, the war had taken its deadly toll. The economic life and social ties which once held Europe together had been torn apart. Cities lay in smoking ruins, railroads were mangled beyond repair, bridges no longer spanned rivers, and people everywhere were weak from hunger. The world had been shaken to its roots. Its only hope seemed to lie in Woodrow Wilson's faith that this had been "the war to end all wars." The peace would have to be laid on firm foundations if this promise could be realized.*

The Major Issues

1. Should Germany be held solely responsible for starting World War I? Should she be forced to pay damages, about \$16 billion, done to civilian property in the lands she occupied and be made to pay for pensions of soldiers, an additional \$17 billion? (Note that amount of money today would be equal to over 7 trillion in year in 2000 U.S. dollars.) How much, if anything, should Germany pay?
2. Should Germany alone be permanently disarmed to the point that she would have fewer than 100,000 soldiers and no battleships, submarines, military airplanes, or tanks? Should all nations be similarly limited in armaments? Or should nothing be done about disarmament and future arms races?
3. Should the Conference recognize the following as independent countries: Austria, Hungary, Yugoslavia, (consisting of Serbia, Bosnia, and Croatia, and Montenegro), Czechoslovakia (consisting of ethnic Germans, Slovaks and Czechs), Poland (consisting of Poles formerly living in Russia and Germany as well as some Germans)? Should Germany and Austria be allowed to form one country?
4. Should France be given the west bank of the Rhine River inhabited by 6 million Germans as a buffer state protecting it from Germany? Should France get the Saar, source of Germany's coal and also the home of Germans, and should Poland get parts of Prussia containing a large Polish minority?
5. Should all of Germany's colonies be given to Great Britain and France (including Southwest Africa, Camerons, and the Caroline Islands in the Pacific)? If not, what should be done with them?
6. Should a League of Nations be formed in which every country is pledged to come to the aid of every other member in the case of enemy attack? If so, should Germany and communist Russia be allowed to join?

The following is presented in a form which will allow classes to simulate the writing of the Versailles Treaty, or simply discuss how the major issues confronting the allies should be resolved

The United States' Objectives

We have already noted that Wilson's 14 Points were to make the world safe for democracy. This objective can be broken down into three parts:

Points 1-5. *Root out the causes of wars.*

These Wilson believed included secret treaties, the violation of freedom of the seas, the existence of tariffs and other trade barriers, arms races, and scramble for colonies. Wilson therefore wanted to end secret treaties, guarantee the right of freedom of the seas, eliminate all trade barriers, begin world wide disarmament, and make a fair adjustment of all colonial claims.

Points 6-13. *Adjust national boundaries in Europe to allow all major ethnic groups a country of their own free of foreign rule.*



Wilson, George of England, Orlando of Italy and Clemenceau of France at the Peace

Thus Germany would leave Belgium, Russia, and Alsace-Lorraine. The Serbs, Czechs, Bosnians, Austrians, Poles, and Hungarians, Finns, Latvians, and all major ethnic groups in Europe would get their own countries and realize their age-old dreams of governing themselves.

Point 14. *Form the League of Nations*

This general association would keep the peace and protect the independence and territory of its members. Every member nation would promise to protect any member of the League that came under attack.

France's Objectives

While Woodrow Wilson inspired Americans to make the world safe for democracy, his major allies were pledged to less lofty goals. They did not feel they could afford the luxury of a fair and just peace. For four agonizing years, German troops had occupied French soil, and Germany's retreating armies at the war's end had deliberately destroyed roads and railroads, and even flooded French coal mines. France was determined that the Germans would never again invade and that Germany's ability to wage war would be destroyed—not for ten years, but for one hundred. "We have been attacked; we want security; we have been despoiled; we want restitution; we have been devastated; we want reparation." To achieve her goals, the French would insist on three things

1. That Germany give up territory: not only Alsace-Lorraine, which Germany had taken in 1871, but also the Saar, Germany's rich coal mines, and the Rhine land (between France and the Rhine river lands inhabited by ethnic Germans) which France hoped to make into a defensible buffer state to protect her from future attacks by Germany.
2. That Germany be forced to admit that it was solely responsible for starting World War I and that she pay for the damages she caused to civilian property.

3. That Germany be totally and permanently disarmed to prevent future attacks, and denied a regular army, battleships, submarines, tanks and warplanes.

France's leader at the Peace Conference was George Clemenceau. Known as the Tiger of France, Clemenceau's great love for his country was matched by his hatred for Germany. He decided that Germany should never again be allowed to become a major power in Europe. Everything he wanted was directed at that great goal, and Wilson's 14 points were irrelevant.

Great Britain's Objectives

The British were not quite as hard on Germany as the French. They wanted a Germany to exist in Europe to trade with England some time in the future and act as a counterweight to France's military power. But the British wanted enough money from Germany to pay for military pensions as well as for property damages. Great Britain wanted Germany's colonies, which she claimed Germany was incapable of governing well, and the British also wanted Germany stripped of her navy, which she regarded as a threat to the British colonial empire.

Great Britain's leader at the Peace Conference was Lloyd George. Like Clemenceau, Lloyd George always wanted what was best for his country. He agreed with Wilson's idea of each ethnic group having its own country – as long as it did not make Germany too strong, or deprive Great Britain of its colonies. Although he wanted to weaken Germany, he wanted to keep it strong enough to be a counterweight to France's power in the future and rich enough to be Great Britain's customer.

Objectives of Other Nations

The Peace Conference began in December 1919 and lasted until May. Altogether, representatives from 32 different nations attended. The "Big Three," Woodrow Wilson, Lloyd George, and Georges Clemenceau, dominated the conference. However, there were others who played a role. For the purpose of enacting a simulation of the Peace Conference, several students should be designated to play the roles of each of the following nations or ethnic groups:

Austria-Hungary – Now Austrians, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Bosnians, etc., These peoples had just broken away from Austria-Hungary, and they wanted a country of their own. They therefore wholeheartedly supported Wilson's principle of national self-determination. They also favored a League of Nations that could protect weak nations against strong countries and future aggressors. At the simulated Conference each group should be prepared to argue why it should have a country of its own.

Serbia – Now Yugoslavia. Has enlarged itself by taking over Croats, Bosnians, Montenegrins, and others who once were part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. They will argue that it should be recognized as a whole country, called Yugoslavia, even though it ruled over other minorities. Serbia will side with Great Britain and France on other issues.

Germany – Germany was not allowed to participate in the Peace Conference, but was told on April 30, 1919, to sign the Treaty. Germany will complain from the sidelines during the simulation

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whenever Wilson's 14 Points aren't being followed, and will insist that the Peace Treaty should be fair and just to Germany.

Russia — Now a communist country called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics following the revolution of 1917 that overthrew the Tsar was not allowed to participate in the Versailles Conference. While the Conference was in progress, British, French, and U.S. troops were in the USSR trying to put down the communist revolution. If the teacher allows them to talk, the Russian communists will support the 14 Points during the simulation, ask that foreign troops be removed from their soil, and demand a return of territories ceded to Germany at Brest-Litvosk to end the war.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Come to class prepared to argue/represent your nation's interest at the Versailles Conference. Every student should be prepared to represent one of the major powers involved in the World War I simulation. Six of the major issues resolved at the Conference are listed below:

Students should come to class with signs showing who they are, and sit with other representatives of their country. France, Great Britain and the United States will sit in the center of the room. Representatives from other countries should sit around the outer edges of the circle and can speak only if recognized by the teacher.

Epilogue: The Peace Treaty

1. A brief summary of the Peace Treaty that Germany was forced to sign follows:

1. The Treaty charged Germany with the primary responsibility for starting World War I and for "causing all the loss and damages" to the Allies including the loss of property and lives as well as the pensions of \$33 billion for soldiers who fought in the war. The equivalent amount today if the U.S. faced a similar bill would be over 7 trillion in year 2000 dollars.

2. The Treaty permanently disarmed Germany. The Germans were not allowed to rebuild their navy or own submarines, tanks, or military aircraft. The Treaty limited Germany's army to 100,000 men. No other nation was similarly disarmed or restricted.

3. The Treaty recognized the creation of many new countries in Europe. These included Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Austria, Yugoslavia, Latvia, Lithuania, etc., and followed Wilson's principle of ethnic self-determination. Frequently, this principle was violated as in the case of making ethnic Germans part of Czechoslovakia to give this new country defensible borders and making ethnic Germans part of Poland. Often several minority groups were forced into one nation as with the Serbs, Bosnians, Moslems, Albanians, and Montenegrins who were all made part of Yugoslavia. Germany and Austria were not allowed to unite.

4. The Treaty denied France the buffer zone it wanted on the left bank of the Rhine River because Germans lived there. The Treaty, however, demilitarized this territory for 15 years and neither side could station soldiers there. France could mine coal in the German speaking Saar region for 15 years, and the US promised to come to France's defense in case of an attack by Germany.

5. The Treaty split Germany's colonies among the victorious allies who ruled them in the name of the League of Nations.

6. The Treaty established the League of Nations which Germany and Russia were not allowed to join. Article X of the League's charter committed all members to aid any League nation under attack.



Europe in 1919
Note: new nations created in central Europe