

# **The Paris Peace Conference and the Treaty of Versailles**

The Paris Peace Conference convened in January 1919 at Versailles just outside Paris. The conference was called to establish the terms of the peace after World War I. Though nearly thirty nations participated, the representatives of the United Kingdom, France, the United States, and Italy became known as the “Big Four.” The “Big Four” dominated the proceedings that led to the formulation of the Treaty of Versailles, a treaty that ended World War I.

The Treaty of Versailles articulated the compromises reached at the conference. It included the planned formation of the League of Nations, which would serve both as an international forum and an international collective security arrangement. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson was a strong advocate of the League as he believed it would prevent future wars.

## **Treaty of Versailles**

Negotiations at the Paris Peace Conference were complicated. The United Kingdom, France, and Italy fought together as the Allied Powers during the First World War. The United States, entered the war in April 1917 as an Associated Power. While it fought alongside the Allies, the United States was not bound to honor pre-existing agreements among the Allied Powers. These agreements focused on postwar redistribution of territories. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson strongly opposed many of these arrangements, including Italian demands on the Adriatic. This often led to significant disagreements among the “Big Four.”

Treaty negotiations were also weakened by the absence of other important nations. Russia had fought as one of the Allies until December 1917, when its new Bolshevik Government withdrew from the war. The Bolshevik decision to repudiate Russia’s outstanding financial debts to the Allies and to publish the texts of secret agreements between the Allies concerning the postwar period angered the Allies. The Allied Powers refused to recognize the new Bolshevik Government and thus did not invite its representatives to the Peace Conference. The Allies also excluded the defeated Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey, and Bulgaria).

According to French and British wishes, the Treaty of Versailles subjected Germany to strict punitive measures. The Treaty required the new German Government to surrender approximately 10 percent of its prewar territory in Europe and all of its overseas possessions. It placed the harbor city of Danzig (now Gdansk) and the coal-rich Saarland under the administration of the League of Nations, and allowed France to exploit the economic resources of the Saarland until 1935. It limited the German Army and Navy in size, and allowed for the trial of Kaiser Wilhelm II and a number of other high-ranking German officials as war criminals. Under the terms of Article 231 of the Treaty, the Germans accepted responsibility for the war and the liability to pay financial reparations to the Allies. The Inter-Allied Commission determined the amount and presented its findings in 1921. The amount they determined was 132 billion gold Reichmarks, or 32 billion U.S. dollars, on top of the initial \$5 billion payment demanded by the Treaty. Germans grew to resent the harsh conditions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles.