

## The End of the War

After the Russian Revolution took the tsar from power in late 1917, the new government led by V. I. Lenin had little interest in carrying on what they considered to be the “tsar’s war.” Instead the new country – the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – turned its attention to restructuring Russian society and to addressing the civil war that the revolution provoked. As a result, the Soviet government signed the Brest-Litovsk Treaty with the Germans in March 1918, giving up substantial territories in western Russia as a concession. However, Germany had to dedicate considerable manpower to occupying the new territory, taking away from their ability to address the issues on the Western Front, where the Entente powers now had the advantage of an infusion of fresh soldiers from the United States. The French, English, and Americans launched a counteroffensive in response to a failed German surge, and Germany simply could not provide the troops to keep the war effort going. After the failure of Habsburg forces in Italy and the Balkans and the abdication of the German Kaiser, the Central Powers surrendered in November 1918, bringing the war to an end.

In 1919 diplomats of the victorious nations gathered at Versailles Palace in France to fashion a peace settlement. None of the Central Powers were represented nor was Russia, so those countries had no say in the agreement that resulted from the compromises reached by the 27 nations that were present. The most influential leaders at the conference were those from Britain, France, and the United States, and the three countries had very different views about what the terms of the peace settlement should be. President Woodrow Wilson of the United States approached the conference with a vision of making the world “safe for democracy,” and a dream that this war would be a “war to end all wars.” He expressed his point of view in a document called the Fourteen Points that he presented to the other Allied powers as his plan for peace. Britain and France had more practical approaches shaped by the history of conflict among European nations, and they both looked to punish Germany. France particularly wanted revenge, and both countries sought reparations (payment of war expenses) from Germany, as well as the permanent weakening of German power. Most of the fighting on the Western Front had occurred in France, and almost 1,400,000 French soldiers had died, and more than 3,000,000 wounded. In contrast, the U.S. casualty rates were 115,000 dead and 206,000 wounded. While the conference was going on, the British continued to

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blockade Germany, and the Allies threatened to renew the war if the Central Powers did not accept their terms. In the end a compromise was reached, but overall, the agreement heavily penalized Germany, creating resentments and economic hardships that erupted twenty years later in a far larger war, a second and more deadly installment of 20th century global warfare.

### The Versailles Treaties (the Peace of Paris)

Several treaties were signed at Versailles – collectively known as the Peace of Paris – with the central treaty laying down the terms for Germany, including these:

- **War guilt** – Article 231 was the “war-guilt” clause that placed sole blame for World War I on German aggression. As a result, the treaty dictated that Germany had to pay reparations to the Allies to compensate for the enormous costs of the war. The final reparations bill came to \$31 billion which Germany was to pay in installments over the next 30 years. This acceptance of war guilt was not only expensive, but also psychologically difficult for Germans because they thought it was unfair for one country to be blamed for starting the war.
- **Territorial losses** – Germany lost about 13% of its land where nearly 10% of its people lived. France, Poland, Belgium, and Denmark all received parts of this land. France regained Alsace-Lorraine, which Germany had taken in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. Poland, which had disappeared from the map of Europe in the 1790s, once again became an independent nation, with land carved from Russia and Germany. All of Germany’s territories in Africa and the Pacific were given as mandates to Britain, France, and Japan, which meant that they were administered on behalf of the League of Nations, the new international peace organization created by the treaty. The Allies were to govern these lands until they determined their readiness for independence.
- **Military restrictions** – The size of the German army was strictly limited, and could place no troops at all in the Rhineland, a strip of land in western Germany between the Rhine River and the French border. Germany was also forbidden to manufacture war materials, including airplanes and submarines. The intent of these restrictions was to keep Germany from ever again waging war against other European nations.

- **The creation of the League of Nations** – The Allies agreed to create an international peace organization charged with keeping another war from occurring. The League of Nations was one of Wilson’s Fourteen Points, and he saw it as a forum where differences among nations could be worked out peaceably rather than by resorting to war. The League’s Executive Council was to consist of the United States, Britain, France, Italy, and Japan (the winners of the war), and a General Assembly would represent 42 Allied and neutral nations. Germany and Russia were not given representation in the new organization.

### ***Original Document: The Principle of Self Determination in Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points***

U.S. President Woodrow Wilson had thought through his aspirations for peace long before he departed for the Versailles Conference in 1919. In fact, he presented his Fourteen Points for peace to Congress on January 8, 1918, several months before the war actually ended. His speech strongly supported the principle of self determination, or the idea that people should have the right to determine for themselves who governs them and how. Wilson explained his support for self determination in these words:

“What we demand in this war, therefore, is nothing peculiar to ourselves. It is that the world be made fit and safe to live in; and particularly that it be made safe for every peace-loving nation, which, like our own, wishes to live its own life, determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and selfish aggression. All the peoples of the world are in effect partners in this interest, and for our own part we see very clearly that unless justice be done to others it will not be done to us.”

The treaty clearly reflected the revenge that France and Britain desired, and its intention to check German power was clear. The treaty with Germany was just one of five signed in France during 1919 and 1920, and other Central Powers were penalized in the other ones. For example, Bulgaria had to give up land to countries that had supported the Allies – Romania, Greece, and Yugoslavia (a new country). Bulgaria also had to pay almost half a billion dollars in reparations. Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire were totally dismantled, and their lands were distributed among newly-created countries and mandates. Russia, too, was severely punished in the agreements because, even though the country had fought on the Allied side, the tsar had been overthrown, and the Versailles powers did not trust the new

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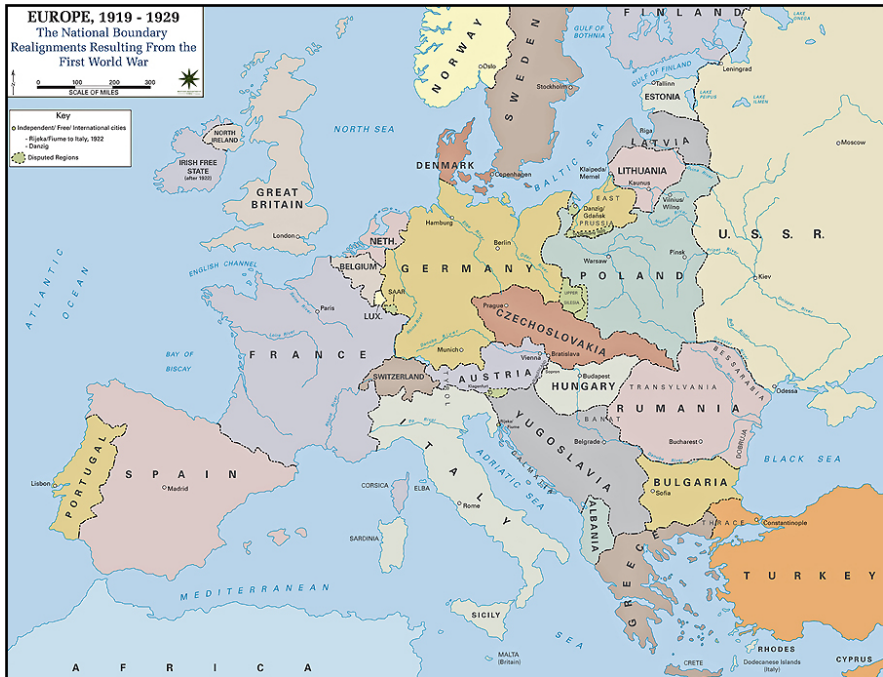
government led by V. I. Lenin. First, Germany had to cancel the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in which it had taken large amounts of Russia's territory in the west, but that land was not returned to Russia. In fact, Russia lost even more land space as a result of the treaties signed at Versailles than it had in the earlier treaty with Germany.

### **Comparison: Post-World War I Treaties and European Biases**

At the Versailles Conference, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson protested the idea of Allies taking lands controlled by the Central Powers as colonies, and he insisted that the principle of self-determination be applied. The other Allied powers agreed, but the differences they made among possessions reflected their belief in the superiority of people of European ancestry. Eastern Europe was divided into new ethnically-based countries, acknowledging their rights to self-determination. However, the Turks – a non-European people – had to fight and negotiate to be recognized as an independent nation, as did Iran and Saudi Arabia. Other Arab people – in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Iraq – did not win independence at all; their lands were put under the protection of France and Britain, causing them to deeply resent their treatment. Germany's African and Asian colonies also did not receive their independence. Whether these actions are interpreted as kindly gestures that resulted from the "White Man's Burden," as Rudyard Kipling explained, or as simple disguises for imperialistic greed, the comparative treatment of European and non-European people at Versailles left a bitter legacy of conflict that continued to destabilize world politics during the 20th and early 21st centuries.

Despite the punitive nature of these agreements, the Allies did not simply seize all of the land for themselves. Instead, the principle of national self-determination that rose from 19th-century liberal traditions played a role in the recreation of the map of Europe at Versailles. Austria-Hungary was carved into new countries based on ethnic identity: Poland was recreated for the Poles, since it had been seized by Prussia, Austria, and Russia more than 100 years earlier; Czechoslovakia was created for two different Slavic people – the Czechs and the Slovaks; and the borders of Yugoslavia encompassed Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Out of Russia came Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which had all declared their independence in 1918 but were now officially recognized by the Allied Powers. Despite the application of the principle of self-determination, there were inconsistencies that stirred up

problems and resentments. For example, one third of the people in Poland did not speak Polish, and Czechoslovakia also had large populations of Germans, Ruthenes, and Hungarians. Part of the problem was that drawing political boundaries was difficult because populations were often intermixed or unevenly divided among ethnic groups within a given area.



## The Mandate System

One of the most controversial decisions made at Versailles had to do with the creation of the mandate system, which set up territories as “trusteeships” under the care of the newly created League of Nations. Whereas eastern European people were organized into independent states, however imperfectly, many of the Arab territories of the Ottoman Empire and Germany’s former colonies in the Pacific and in Africa were designated as mandates. According to Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, these areas were “inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world... the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to the advanced nations who... can best undertake this responsibility.”

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The establishment of mandates among the Arab states of the former Ottoman Empire violated promises made to Arabs by both France and Britain during the war, and Jewish nationalists in Europe saw the system as a violation of the Balfour Declaration. As soon as the war was over, Italy and Greece tried to take lands around Istanbul that were inhabited primarily by Turks. These efforts were met with fierce resistance by the Turkish leader, Mustafa Kemal, or Ataturk, who managed to negotiate a new Turkish republic in 1923. However, the rest of the Ottoman holdings were divided up as mandates of the League of Nations, with Britain controlling Palestine and Iraq, and France taking Syria and Lebanon. In response, other kingdoms – such as Iran and Saudi Arabia – organized to assert control over their own lands. The results were a fragmented Middle East and a legacy of resentment toward western nations.

## Europe after the Peace Settlements of 1919-1920

The political boundaries in central, east, and east-central Europe changed significantly as a result of the Russian Revolution and the Peace of Paris. The Ottoman Empire and Austria-Hungary were broken up into multiple small states, and Germany and Russia lost significant amounts of territory. The Russian Empire was renamed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.), although a civil war raged on in Russia until 1921.

The acceptance of the League of Nations as an integral part of the peace treaties was in many ways a “marker event” in world history because it signaled a new type of international organization whose purposes went beyond those of nation-states. According to Woodrow Wilson’s 14th point, “a general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.” He clearly did not see the League as a substitute for the nation-state, but as a power that could help countries avoid war in the future. Unfortunately, the organization was doomed almost from the start, even though 26 of the original 42 members were non-European, signaling a truly international organization.

One problem was that the League had no power to enforce its decisions, and so even though international disputes were arbitrated, countries that did not want to comply did not have to. Another issue was the principle of collective security, or the agreement that if any of the member nations of the League were attacked, the others were bound to give it military aid. This clause was strongly opposed by Senate leaders in the United States because in

their view it violated the traditional isolationist foreign policy of the United States. In his bid to gain public support for the League, Wilson embarked on a speaking tour across the country, but he tragically suffered a debilitating stroke that left him unable to defend his efforts, and the United States refused to sign the Versailles Treaty and did not join the League of Nations. Germany and Japan believed that the League served Allied needs only, and both withdrew their membership in 1933. The Soviet Union joined the organization in 1934, but it was expelled in 1940.

With all of these problems, the League was unable to stop the onset of World War II, and it collapsed as the new war began. However, the League of Nations set the precedent for a new type of international organization, and plans for its successor – the United Nations – were being made even before the older organization collapsed.