

PARIS 1919: Study Guide

Summary: Paris, January 20, 1919. The Great War ended two months ago. No peace treaty has been negotiated and a dozen small wars are still raging in Europe. The scale of the war's destruction is seen in the ever-present maimed, injured and mourning citizens. Ten thousand politicians, diplomats, arms sellers and spies arrive in Paris for a conference that will forever shape the course of history.

The Context—Important Facts & Figures to know:

Thirty-Two Diplomatic Delegations and Co.

The Paris Peace Conference received 32 national delegations, comprised of more than 500 diplomats, representing nearly 75 percent of the world's population. A remarkable assortment of other international figures also flocked to Paris, including Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann, Queen Marie of Romania, Lawrence of Arabia, King Feisal and Ho Chi Minh – a kitchen hand at the time who went on to become the first president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

Newsmen, Socialites and Arms Dealers

About 500 reporters were in Paris to cover the event. The city also became a destination for countless other interested parties: businessmen seeking reconstruction deals, socialites seeking rich husbands, arms dealers flogging their wares and lobbyists and petitioners seeking to advance one agenda or another.

The Treaty of Versailles

The most famous document to come out of the Peace Conference was signed with great public ceremony at the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles on June 28, 1919. It officially brought the war with Germany to an end and established the terms of peace. Work continued until 1920 on separate treaties with Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey.

German War Reparations

The final terms established that Germany, in acknowledging its guilt in starting the war, should pay 132 billion gold marks (about \$33 billion U.S.) in reparations. In the end only about \$4.5 billion was paid.

Paving the Path to the Second World War?

John Maynard Keynes, a member of the British delegation, would later criticize the Peace Conference in his book *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, claiming that the final deal imposed impossibly harsh terms on the defeated Germans. In ensuing years many historians have endorsed his view, blaming the Big Four for creating conditions that paved the way for Nazism and WWII.

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New Countries, New Problems

Iraq, Yugoslavia and Palestine were among the new countries created at the Paris Peace Conference. Many current international problems – the Iraq crisis, the Palestine-Israel conflict, the various Balkan wars and the Kurdish struggle for a homeland – trace their roots to decisions made in Paris in 1919.

Italy and Japan: Allies of Entente Powers

In contrast with WWII, when both would become German allies, Italy and Japan fought against Germany in WWI and had delegations at the Peace Conference. The Japanese, represented by senior diplomats rather than their prime minister, pushed unsuccessfully for provisions to ban racial discrimination in the first Covenant of the League of Nations.

First World War Casualties: Unprecedented in History

The First World War, with its newly developed weaponry and systems of warfare, claimed more lives than any previous war. An estimated ten million died, including 1.7 million Russians, 1.6 million Germans, 1.3 million French, 900,000 Austro-Hungarians, more than 600,000 Britons and about 60,000 Americans. Canada lost about 60,000 men, and Newfoundland – which sent its own forces – lost about 1,500.

Heavy French Losses

Being on the frontlines, France not only suffered huge casualties – one quarter of all men between 18 and 30 died and over four million were wounded – but also sustained massive blows to its economy. About six thousand square miles had been decimated – regions that prior to the war produced 20 percent of the nation's crops, 90 percent of its iron ore and 60 percent of its steel.

Fallen Empires

The war saw the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and left the Ottoman Empire fatally weakened. In Russia, the 1917 Revolution had ended the rule of the Tsars, and Bolshevism was inciting both interest and fear throughout Europe and North America.

1918 Flu Epidemic

Adding to the chaos and suffering of the post-war period, a virulent flu epidemic swept across the globe between 1918 and 1920, claiming up to fifty million lives.

Worldwide Social Unrest

A cause of concern to political classes everywhere, the 1917 Russian Revolution had incited a wave of social unrest across Europe and North America, with general strikes taking place from Paris to Glasgow and San Francisco to Winnipeg.

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Answer Questions on a separate sheet of paper

Before viewing:

1. How much do you think Germany should have had to repay Britain and France as a result of losing the war?
2. Do you think it is possible for all stakeholders (people involved in the negotiations) to be satisfied? Why or why not?
3. Can a monetary value be placed on dead soldiers, lost livestock and destroyed countryside? Address the challenge of measuring the costs of war.
4. How does France, in particular, suffer as a result of the war?
5. Which new nations come about as a result of these negotiations? Will new national boundaries be fair and just? Address the challenge of redrawing national boundaries in the aftermath of WWI.
6. Can a new world order remedy enduring causes of conflict such as religious and ethnic divides and power hierarchies? Address the challenge of engaging the United States (i.e. a New World nation previously isolated from Old World conflicts) in the new internationalism required of the League of Nations.

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During viewing:

7. How do you think the challenges (listed above) affected the negotiations?
8. Identify the leaders from each country of the “Great Powers”: France, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, and the United States. What did each nation hope to achieve at the conference? How similar are their objectives?
9. Harold Nicholson states: “The Americans have won the war; now they will win the peace.” Do you feel this is a valid statement?
10. What challenges do you think the cartographers might have to contend with in redrawing national boundaries?
11. When the Germans arrive in Paris, Clemenceau says “The Germans are beaten but they’re not crushed. We must finish the job.” Do you think this was a good perspective for the Allies? Why or why not?
12. What was the intention of stopping the German train in Verdun? Do you think this helped or hindered the goals of the peace settlement?
13. The conference entered its fifteenth week and at the same time 100,000 troops per month were returning home. What impact might this have on the tone of the conference? What would the impact be on the United States?
14. How do the original intentions of the leaders compare with the results after weeks of negotiations?

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After Viewing

15. Keynes' character presented two alternatives for Germany: "Either we cancel Germany's debt entirely and let her rebuild to become a partner in the world community, or we open our markets to her goods to let her earn the money to pay us back." Woodrow Wilson advocated leniency towards German reparations. Why did Keynes propose such radical solutions? What might have happened if either of his suggestions had been successful?

16. Why do you think the Germans were confident that Wilson would honor the promise of a just peace? Based on your understanding of the 14 Points and evidence taken from the film, do you believe the Germans were justified in their belief?

17. Brockdorff-Rantzau's (Germany) response to the terms of the peace treaty is: "We were betrayed." Do you feel this is valid?

18. Do you feel the Germans were wrong in thinking they would be treated as equals? Was that a fair assumption to make?

19. How did this video make you feel about the war and the conference in general?

20. What questions do you believe this video leaves unanswered?