



## The Big Three at the Paris Peace Conference

This is a transcript of the [Big Three at the Paris Peace Conference](#) podcast from [www.mrallsophistory.com](http://www.mrallsophistory.com)

In 1919, a few months after Germany signed the Armistice to bring fighting in World War One to a close, a group of politicians known as the Big Three met at the Palace of Versailles outside Paris to decide the fate of Germany. The key personalities you need to know are the leaders of Britain, David Lloyd George, the USA (Woodrow Wilson) and France (Georges Clemenceau). Germany itself had absolutely no say in the peace negotiations.

The leaders of the countries found themselves under enormous pressure to deal very severely with Germany. The general opinion of the people at home was that Germany had caused the war, and so needed to be punished accordingly. This was particularly the case in Britain and France, where the total number of soldiers killed or injured in the fighting was probably over 9 million. The scale of loss in the Great War was, frankly, shocking. However, although the human cost of the war was appallingly high, so too were the social and economic effects. Food and medicine shortages had become part of daily life, while the industries in the warring nations had been dedicated to producing material for the so-called War Economy at the cost of normal people's needs. In those areas where the fighting was at its worse – such as Belgium and France on the Western Front – entire villages and towns had been reduced to rubble due to the constant bombardment of high explosives.

There was also something of a political reason to treat Germany harshly. When Russia had exited the war, it had to sign the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany. This treaty had been drawn up by Germany, and was interpreted by many as one of the harshest agreements ever created. It had stripped Russia of huge amounts of both agricultural and industrial land, and removed somewhere around 25% of its total population. The Allies in World War One interpreted this as a blueprint for what Germany would have done to them, had Germany won the war. It was therefore, in their view, perfectly acceptable to draft a treaty containing severe terms that Germany would now have to agree to.

The problem at the conference, though, was that the Big Three ultimately wanted different things. For David Lloyd George, people at home were pressuring him to 'squeeze Germany like a lemon' in revenge for the death of a generation. To many in Britain, they would only be happy with a treaty that punished Germany. Lloyd George himself, however, wanted peace and trade. He wanted a peace in Europe that would last, in order to allow Britain to rebuild its crippled economy. Before the war Germany had been Britain's second-biggest trading partner, and if the final treaty was too harsh then Germany would not be able to buy British goods, which would put British jobs at risk in the long-run. Therefore he needed to try to balance the calls for punishment with a desire for economic recovery. However, he was quite



happy to take some of Germany's overseas colonies and add them to the British Empire if he got the chance. After all, Germany's imperial ambitions had threatened Britain before the war and Lloyd George saw this as an opportunity to turn the tables.

France, meanwhile, wanted to go one step further. In the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, France had already been invaded by – and lost land to – a German army. The enormous damage caused in the First World War poured salt in the wound. German troops had been sitting on French soil for four years, had crippled French industry, destroyed its land, and killed its people. On a human level, over two-thirds of the men who had served in the French army had been killed or injured in the war. The French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau was understandably under enormous pressure to make France safe from any possible German attack in the future. For most French people this meant crippling Germany both economically and physically. Clemenceau therefore demanded a treaty that would weaken Germany as much as possible to ensure security from any future attack, and sought financial compensation from Germany (these were called reparations) for the physical and economic damage caused by the war.

The third of the Big Three was Woodrow Wilson of the USA who is often portrayed as a kind-of idealist who wanted a safer and happier world to emerge from the destruction of the war. To some extent this is true, but it's important not to misinterpret Wilson's intentions. It's true that he wanted a lasting peace, but he also wanted a just or fair one. Woodrow Wilson did believe that Germany should be punished – but that the punishment needed to be appropriate. He strongly believed that if Germany was treated too harshly then in the future it might recover and want revenge. But Wilson also had a tricky balance to strike with people at home. While he wanted the USA to get involved in future world politics as a force for good, the number of casualties in the war had horrified Americans at home who wanted to stay out of the world's problems by following a policy of isolationism.

Therefore Wilson he set out his aims in January 1918 in a list called the Fourteen Points – a mixture of ideals and practical measures that sought to implement a 'just and lasting peace'. A key focus of the 14 Points was self-determination, which allowed people who lived within an Empire to have a say in their own government. While this would affect the various nationalities who made up the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it would also affect all those people living in the Allied Empires of Britain and France. He also wanted to set up something called The League of Nations, a sort-of international police force to help countries sort out disputes without going to war. In addition to this he wanted to make a few frontier changes, and to encourage all countries-both on the winning and the losing sides to work towards disarmament – a reduction in the number of weapons they owned.



With all these differences of opinion it was inevitable that there would be some friction between the Big Three. David Lloyd George was annoyed with Wilson for claiming that Britain should give some kind of say to the people in its colonies, especially since the Fourteen Points also proposed giving all nations access to the seas. Britain interpreted this as a direct threat to its dominant position in the world, as it needed naval supremacy to rule the millions of people who lived in its vast Empire. Lloyd George was also worried on a personal level about Georges Clemenceau, who had already tried to punch him!

For his part, Clemenceau felt that he couldn't trust Lloyd George. He found it hypocritical that Britain was prepared to treat Germany fairly in Europe, but not do the same on an international level. It looked to him as though Lloyd George was happy to let France be threatened by neighbouring Germany, but insist on stripping Germany of its navy and colonies which were a direct threat to Britain abroad.

Wilson, meanwhile, felt that Lloyd George and Clemenceau were too selfish and were just trying to get a good deal for their own countries while he, in his opinion at least, was trying to make the world a safer place. Clemenceau felt that the USA had not suffered as much as France in the war, and so resented Wilson's more generous attitude to Germany which forced the two men to agree to a number of compromises.

Despite all these problems, though, after many months of disputes a treaty was finalised. On the 28th June 1919 the German government signed the Treaty of Versailles. The problem for the Big Three, though, was that none of them were completely satisfied with the final terms of the Treaty.

A popular exam question asks about 'how far' the Big Three were satisfied with the Treaty, and so it's important to have clear evidence to support your argument. This type of question requires you to show ways in which they were satisfied with the Treaty, and ways in which they weren't, before you then draw a final conclusion on 'how far'.

Clemenceau had wanted the treaty to be much harsher – for example he would have preferred Germany to be broken up into smaller states so that it wasn't large enough to ever threaten France again – but Wilson had stopped that from happening. Wilson thought that the final treaty was far too harsh, and that one day Germany would seek revenge. He famously claimed that if he were a German he would never have signed it, but he recognised that it was a necessary compromise. In 1920, the American Congress effectively dismissed the compromise – they voted against ratifying the Treaty of Versailles, which meant that in the end America never actually did sign it. Although Lloyd George of Britain wasn't exactly satisfied with the final treaty, it would be fair to say that he had the least to complain about. Lloyd George returned to a hero's welcome in Britain, but later said that the treaty was 'a great pity' and that he predicted it would cause another war.



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In the next podcast we'll investigate the final terms of the Treaty and what people in different countries felt about it. We'll also consider how fair the Treaty was towards Germany, in order to present a balanced discussion on both sides of the argument.