Plans For Peace: France

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It was only in October 1918 that the Allies (France, Britain, the USA and Italy) began to realize that they were winning the war. They began to make plans for the peace. They intended to hold a preliminary conference in Paris early in 1919. Here they would decide on the main issues that had to be resolved with Germany and its allies. They would then hold talks with the other important allied powers, especially Japan. Then they would discuss issues with smaller powers like Belgium and Serbia. Finally, the Big Four (President Wilson of the USA, David Lloyd George of Britain, Vittorio Orlando of Italy and Georges Clemenceau of France) would sit down with the Germans and negotiate a treaty.

This proved to be impossible. The issues were too complex. What actually happened was the Big Four were bombarded with petitions from all over the world. In the Middle East there were calls for the Arabs who had fought against the Turks to be given their own homeland. There was a similar call from Jews. In Eastern and Central Europe the many different nations that had belonged to the old Austro-Hungarian Empire wanted to rule themselves. The problem was that the populations of Eastern Europe were so mixed up that it was almost impossible to create, for example, a Poland with only Poles in or a Yugoslavia with no Germans in.

Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern and Central Europe were all terribly important issues. However, there was one issue above all others for Britain, France and the USA – what to do with Germany. From January to June of 1919, this issue dominated peace talks.

France

Georges Clemenceau led France at the Peace Conference. Clemenceau was a passionate and patriotic leader. Like most of his countrymen, he was extremely bitter about the damage and death that Germany had caused his country.

He looked at his country’s recent history. Before 1871, there was no Germany, just a collection of states in central Europe. However, the biggest German state, Prussia, had united the German states into one empire in 1871. France had opposed this, but the Prussians defeated the French in a bitter war in 1870-1. The new Germany also forced France to pay compensation and took control of the province of Alsace-Lorraine. Most of the population of this area was French.

Clemenceau could also point to very recent history. As the German forces retreated through Belgium and France in the autumn of 1918, they destroyed factories, homes, schools, crops and livestock. In some areas they left a wasteland behind them.

Clemenceau also noted out that the Germans completely rejected Wilson’s Fourteen Points when he announced them in January 1918. At that time, it looked as though the Germans might win the war as their armies were making tremendous advances on the Western Front. Germany had also signed a treaty with Bolshevik-led Russia in March 1918. In the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk the Germans took huge amounts of land and industrial equipment from Russia. They also forced Russia to pay a huge fine of 300 million roubles.

Clemenceau argued that the Germans would have done the same thing to Britain and France if they had won the war. He believed that France would never be safe unless Germany was crippled. In his view, Germany should be forced to pay large amounts in reparations to Belgium.
and France. Clemenceau also wanted Germany to be broken up into small states again and banned from re-uniting.

Clemenceau’s problem was that he did not have the resources to achieve his aims. To split up Germany, he would have to invade across the Rhine and then occupy Germany. Germans would fight back. France did not have the troops, money or equipment to do this. Clemenceau would need the British and American forces and they did not share his views. He would have to use his political skills to get the harshest possible treaty.

Excerpted from “The Great War: 1914 - 1918”