

Treaty of Versailles (1919)

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Description The Treaty of Versailles was a central component of the peace settlement following World War I and refers to the German treaty signed on 19 June 1919. The term, however, is often used interchangeably with the numerous decisions and treaties negotiated at the Paris Peace Conference, over six months, in 1919. As proposed by Woodrow Wilson in his "Fourteen Point Plan," the peace settlement aimed to redraw state boundaries following World War I according to the principle of self-determination. The main players at the Peace Conference were Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, also described as the "Big Four." The United States was the dominant member of the group. Over thirty national groups sent delegations to Paris to present their claims to territory.

The Peace Conference sought, through the principle of self-determination, to make the concept of the "state" correspond directly with the concept of the "nation." The Great Powers attempted to minimize citizens within states that did not belong to the majority national group. Self-determination, however, was not the only consideration when drawing state boundaries (MacMillan 2001). Many decisions — for example, to increase or decrease a given state's territory were made in response to the threat of Russian Bolshevism. According to Hannum (1990) the decisions made at the Peace Conference had less to do with the self-determination of minority groups and more to do with the geopolitical and strategic interests of the Great Powers.

The Peace Conference was responsible for creating new borders throughout Central Europe and the Middle East. Inevitably, this project led to extensive forms of exclusion. In particular, this division of territory created large national minorities within States. Numerous minority treaties were adopted following World War I to protect these groups, but the treaties were not enforced. States argued that national minorities were under their jurisdiction and therefore did not respect international minority treaties that placed constraints on their sovereignty. After the Cold War, the notion of sovereignty based on non-interference in domestic affairs, including the situation of minorities, was increasingly questioned with developments in international humanitarian law. One legacy of the Treaty of Versailles has therefore been the modern conception of the "ethnonational minority group" (Bishai 1998). Many current international conflicts and struggles for minority rights have their roots in the territorial divisions forged at the Peace Conference in Versailles.

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