Paris 1919

Britain, France and the USA won the First World War. In 1919 their leaders met together in Paris to decide on the future of Europe and the world. These leaders were known as the Big Three.

What were the motives of the Big Three in 1919?

PROBLEMS FOR THE WINNERS

The leaders of the victorious countries faced a number of complex problems:

- Germany had heavily defeated Britain, Russia and France single-handed. How could the winners make sure that Germany could not fight another war in the future?
- Communists had seized power in Russia. Communists wanted to destroy all other capitalist governments by workers' revolution.
- Central and Eastern Europe were in chaos. The royal families of Germany and Austria-Hungary had abdicated before the peace conference.
- The British and the French governments had entered into a number of secret treaties during the war. They had promised Japan special treatment in Asia. Under the Treaty of London of 1915, Italy had agreed to join the allies in return for the promise of gains from Austria-Hungary. Japan and Italy now expected to be given their rewards.
- Nationalists in Eastern Europe had set up new governments even before the war had officially ended. By early November 1918 there were new states in Yugoslavia, Poland and Czechoslovakia.
- The end of the war came more quickly than the allies had expected. The victorious allies had given little thought to the arrangements for peace. When they did begin discussing the peace it became clear that the winners had very different views about the future.

Activity

'Writing the peace treaties was never going to be easy.' Do you agree with this statement? Use the information in the table to support your answer.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE BIG THREE

Perhaps the biggest problem faced at the peace conferences was the fact that the winning countries had very different views about what should happen next. The key players were the so-called Big Three. (The term 'the Big Four' is used when Italy is also included.)

The differences between the Allies were hidden while the war was fought. The French and the British did not agree with many of Wilson's views. However, they had been desperate to make sure that the USA supported the war. During the war, they kept quiet in public, for fear that disagreement would limit the American war effort. Once the fighting had stopped the French and the British started to disagree with the Americans.

A 'just peace' or reparations?

The American President Wilson was a very religious man. His aim was a just peace. He believed that God wanted him to make the world a better place. He disliked his allies in Britain and France. Wilson believed that politics was a simple matter of right and wrong. The European leaders were more concerned about selfish national interest than doing good. Wilson thought that Europeans had caused the war and it was America's mission to stop this happening again. In 1919 Wilson said, 'I do not mean any disrespect to any other great people when I say that America is the hope of the world. And if she does not justify that hope the results are unthinkable.' He thought that the old style of politics could be swept away if a new world organisation was set up called the League of Nations.

Wilson was a great believer in the idea of self-determination. This meant that each nation should have the right to decide for itself how it should be governed. Living far away in America, Wilson did not appreciate how difficult self-determination was in much of Eastern Europe. If Czechs and Germans and Slovaks lived together in an area, who had the right of self-determination? The opposite of self-determination was imperialism: the control of many nations by one powerful empire. The British and the French were imperialists.

Their governments were very suspicious of talk of self-determination.

Britain and France wanted reparations from Germany. This was the payment of compensation for the damage caused in the war. Wilson was much less concerned about reparations. Britain and France had built up huge debts to pay for the war; they saw reparations as a way of getting rid of these debts. The USA did not have enormous war debts. Indeed, America was owed much of the money borrowed by Britain and France.

SOURCE A

Anti-German propaganda. An American recruitment poster of 1917 suggests that the German army was extremely brutal and must be stopped. After the war there was an argument about how far Germany should be punished for its actions.
The Fourteen Points

Woodrow Wilson made his own idealistic aims clear a year before the Paris conference. Speaking in January 1918, long before the war ended, President Wilson stated what he wanted as Fourteen Points.

SOURCE C

In January 1918 Wilson explained the thinking behind the Fourteen Points:

One principle runs through the whole program. It is the principle of justice to all peoples and all nationalities, whether they be strong or weak. Without this principle there can be no international justice. For this principle, the people of the United States are ready to devote their lives, their honor, and everything that they possess.

SOURCE D

Wilson knew that he disagreed with the French and the British. As early as 1917 he wrote a private note that said:

England and France have not the same views with respect to peace that we have by any means. When the war is over we can force them to our way of thinking because by that time they will, among other things, be financially in our hands.

SOURCE E

A Home from Home.

A British Punch cartoon shows Wilson striding purposefully from America to Europe. His boats are decorated with the numbers 1-14; a reference to Wilson's famous Fourteen Points.

SOURCE F

When the war was virtually over, on 29 October 1918, Clemenceau met Lloyd George. Now that the fighting had finished they could begin to express their disagreements with Wilson. According to one account, they discussed how far they agreed with the Fourteen Points:

Clemenceau: Have you ever been asked whether you accept the Fourteen Points? I have never been asked.

Lloyd George: I have never been asked either. We cannot accept the second point under any conditions, it means the power of the blockade goes. Germany has been broken almost as much by the blockade as by military methods, if this power is to be handed over to the League of Nations and Great Britain were fighting for her life, no League of Nations would prevent her from defending herself.

SOURCE G

Lloyd George, Clemenceau and Wilson together in Paris. Clemenceau seems to be affectionately taking Wilson by the arm. In reality Clemenceau greatly distrusted the American President.

Activity

Britain and France did not like all of the Fourteen Points. Look at this list of British and French policies:

- They had made secret treaties before and during the war.
- They had powerful navies: the British Navy was the strongest in the world. These forces were sometimes used to stop the free movement of ships at sea.
- Both Britain and France ruled great empires that they wished to keep, regardless of the feelings of the local people.

Look back at Wilson's Fourteen Points. Which particular points do you think the British and the French governments disliked?
**Lloyd George and a compromise peace**

Lloyd George was the British Prime Minister. He occupied the middle ground between France and the USA. Like Clemenceau he had to listen to public opinion at home. This had been influenced by a press campaign demanding harsh treatment for Germany. He was not personally anxious to punish the Germans severely. He was afraid that if Germany was too weak this would give France too much power in Europe.

The chief concern of Lloyd George was to make sure that the British Empire did not suffer as a result of the settlement. There was an early difference of opinion between Wilson and Lloyd George over the future of the former German colonies. Wilson hated imperialism and he wanted the colonies to be looked after by the new League of Nations until they became independent. Lloyd George wanted them divided up between the winning powers. Lloyd George wanted to make sure that South Africa, Australia and New Zealand were rewarded with nearby German territories. Both Britain and France also wanted a share of the former Turkish lands of the Middle East.

The British government team was suspicious of France. Traditionally, France had been an enemy of Britain. The British did not want a Europe dominated by France. The more they wanted a German-controlled Europe. This was another reason for making sure that Germany was not too harshly treated. Lloyd George was also worried that a weak Germany would be unable to stop the spread of communism.

**SOURCE 1**

One eye-witness at the peace conference was a famous British economist called John Maynard Keynes. Keynes later wrote a description of the French leader, Clemenceau.

His approach was simple. He believed that Germans could understand nothing except intimidation. Germans have no honour, pride or mercy. You cannot negotiate with a German; you must dictate to him.

Politics was about power. Some lip-service was needed to the "ideals" of foolish Americans and hypocritical Englishmen. It would be stupid to take too seriously Wilson's ideas about the League of Nations and self-determination.

**SOURCE 3**

Mark well what I am telling you. In six months, in a year, five years, ten years, when they like, as they like, the Germans will invade us again.

We were attacked. We are victorious. We represent right, and might is ours. This might must be used in the service of the right.

Clemenceau, 1919

**SOURCE K**

André Tardieu, one of the French negotiators at Paris in 1919, was keen to take a hard line towards Germany.

France, like Britain and the United States, needs a zone of safety. Britain and America are naval powers and they create their zone of safety with their fleets and the destruction of the German fleet. France is unprotected by the ocean and must create its own safety by the occupation of the Rhineland area. To ask us to give up occupation of the Rhineland is like asking England and the United States to sink their fleets of battleships.

France has a unique experience of Germany. No one has suffered as she has. When dealing with Germany, it is France which must be heard.

**Activity**

Look back at pages 12–17. Explain in your own words:

a. what each of the Big Three wanted at the Paris peace talks;

b. how far the Big Three disagreed with each other.