

Source A

Lloyd George, Clemenceau and Wilson at Versailles



Lloyd George at Versailles

Mark Rathbone examines the role Lloyd George played at the Versailles Conference

In the Versailles settlement section of GCSE specifications, 'The views of the leaders' is a familiar subheading. The US president, Woodrow Wilson, wanted the peace treaty to be fair on the defeated countries and hoped his pet project, the League of Nations, would usher in a new golden age of peace.

However, the French premier, Georges Clemenceau, wanted to punish Germany severely, getting revenge not just for the First World War, but for the Franco-Prussian War too.

What of the British prime minister, David Lloyd George? His views are often presented as a bit of an afterthought, somewhere in between the extremes of the other two leaders. But was there more to Lloyd George's part in the Versailles Conference than a rather unexciting middle-of-the-road position between Clemenceau and Wilson?

Radical MP and peace campaigner

Lloyd George's previous political career was a mixed, and in some ways a contradictory, one. Elected a Liberal MP at the age of 27 in 1890, he quickly earned a reputation as one of the most radical MPs in the House of Commons. When the Boer War broke out in 1899, he frequently spoke at public meetings attacking the Conservative government's decision to enter the war and its conduct of the campaign in South Africa. On one occasion in 1901, he narrowly escaped with his life when a hostile crowd besieged Birmingham Town Hall and he had to escape through a back door disguised as a policeman.

'The man who won the war'

It is rather ironic that 15 years later, this energetic peace campaigner became Britain's wartime prime minister. And he had proved to be a very effective one — newspapers called him 'The man who won the war' and his government won a huge majority in the general election of December 1918. The same election campaign produced demands that the defeated enemy should be made to pay the full cost of the war — 'squeeze Germany until the pips squeak'. Some even called for Kaiser Wilhelm to be hanged as a war criminal. It was in this atmosphere of hatred that Lloyd George set off to represent Britain at the Versailles Conference.

This, however, put the prime minister in a difficult position. For while he had been only too glad to ride the tide of popular adulation and patriotic



Source C

David Lloyd George

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Source B

Eyewitness Sisley Huddleston's account of the opening of the Paris Peace Conference, 18 January 1919:

Marshal Foch, Mr. Wilson, President Poincaré, Mr. Lloyd George and M. Clemenceau formed a group whose points of view it seemed hardly possible to reconcile. After all, when one looked and remembered 'so many men, so many minds', it seemed hopeless to expect that they could all be satisfied.

pride which had won him the election, his own views about how Germany and the other defeated countries should be treated were very different. He had been raised in the radical liberal tradition of internationalism and tolerance. For all his success as a war leader, the distaste for nationalistic imperialism which had been so evident during the Boer War remained an important part of his political creed.

He believed that the central aim of the Versailles Conference should be to build a sustainable and lasting peace, not to get revenge on Germany. He realised that if the treaty was too harsh on Germany, it would leave a legacy of resentment which could form the seeds of a future conflict. Yet not only was he negotiating with the French prime minister, Georges Clemenceau, who was much more strongly anti-German, but he was also presiding over a coalition government with a majority of Conservative members whose views were closer to Clemenceau's than to his own.

Clemenceau

At the conference's opening session on 18 January 1919, US President Woodrow Wilson proposed Clemenceau as conference president, and Lloyd George felt obliged to second the proposal. He made an enthusiastic speech, praising Clemenceau's experience, energy and courage. Yet even then, he hinted at conflict ahead, mentioning that they had sometimes disagreed in the past and had 'always been in the habit of expressing our opinions with...force and vigour'. It was certainly a habit they were to continue at Versailles.

Initially, it was decided that the main decision-making body at Versailles was to be the Council of Ten. This consisted of Wilson, Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Vittorio Orlando, the prime minister of Italy, together with their respective foreign ministers, and two Japanese representatives. This unwieldy forum had no less than 72 meetings between January and March 1919, but did not seem to be getting anywhere with the many highly complex issues it was trying to resolve.

So it was that in late March, it was replaced by the Council of Four, consisting only of Wilson, Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Orlando, though the Italian leader was largely ignored by the other

- 1 Study Source B.
To what extent do you think that Huddleston's opinion at the start of the Versailles Conference that the leaders 'formed a group whose points of view it seemed hardly possible to reconcile' proved to be correct?

2 Study Source D. Italian prime minister Orlando's show of emotion followed the refusal of the other leaders to allow Italy to have the Adriatic port of Fiume. After this episode he and the Italian delegation walked out of the conference, but they returned 2 weeks later.

a How useful is this source to a historian studying the Versailles Conference?

b To what extent do you think Orlando's behaviour increased or reduced his influence at Versailles?

3 Study Source E. Keynes was a member of the British delegation, who resigned because he disagreed strongly with some of the decisions. He wrote a book criticising the treaty, from which this quotation is taken. How reliable is this source to a historian studying the Versailles Conference?

Source F

The Hall of Mirrors, Versailles

Source D

Eyewitness Frances Stevenson, Lloyd George's secretary, writing in her diary, 20 April 1919:

Suddenly Orlando appeared at the window and put his head in his hands. I saw him take out his handkerchief and wipe his eyes and cheeks. Orlando was overcome and began to sob.

Source E

The reader will thus apprehend how Mr. Lloyd George came to occupy an ostensibly middle position, and how it became his role to explain the President to Clemenceau and Clemenceau to the President and to seduce everybody all round.

From *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* by J. M. Keynes, 1919

three. Not that any of the leaders went into the conference alone — the ship which carried Lloyd George across the Channel to the conference also took 750 civil servants and advisers.

Rhineland

Divisions between the leaders were evident from the start. All were agreed that France should regain Alsace and Lorraine, annexed by Germany in 1871, but Clemenceau, anxious to weaken Germany and protect France's security, wanted much more. He demanded French annexation of the Rhineland. This went against Wilson's guiding principle of national self-determination — the great majority of the people in the Rhineland were German — and Lloyd George saw the danger of piling up German grievances which could fuel a future war.

Lloyd George suggested an Anglo-American military guarantee to France against unprovoked

German aggression, in return for France abandoning its claims to the Rhineland. This went some way to reassuring Clemenceau, but he wanted more concessions, notably the demilitarisation and Allied occupation of the Rhineland, including a 50 kilometre wide strip of land on the German side of the river. Lloyd George and Wilson agreed to this, though Clemenceau held out for a 15-year occupation, which was considerably longer than Lloyd George had had in mind. Nevertheless, it was Lloyd George's suggestion of the Anglo-American guarantee which had led to a way forward on the Rhineland question.

Upper Silesia

On Germany's eastern frontier, Upper Silesia presented a difficult problem. The population was part-German and part-Polish, and which country had the better claim depended on exactly where you drew the boundaries. The area provided Germany with almost a quarter of its coal and a much larger proportion of its zinc and iron ore. Handing it to Poland would be a major blow to Germany's industrial strength — so naturally Clemenceau was all in favour of this. Wilson, with perhaps an eye on the votes of Polish-Americans back home, showed signs of supporting him. Lloyd George's principal concern was to avoid war and he opposed 'transferring more Germans from German rule to the rule of some other nation'. He said this could encourage support for communism and lead to future conflict.

It was agreed that a plebiscite would decide the region's future and when it was eventually held in 1921, a majority of Upper Silesians (707,000 to 480,000) voted to remain under German rule. But while the bulk of Upper Silesia remained German, the eastern part of the region was handed to





Source G

British troops protecting the demilitarised Rhineland, as agreed at Versailles

Poland, leaving many Germans on the Polish side of the border and Poles on the German one. Lloyd George's intervention in this question had been less successful, but his warnings that German grievances over the border with Poland could lead to a future war proved all too prophetic in 1939.

Reparations

Another bone of contention at Versailles was the amount of reparations — the compensation which Germany would be required to pay the Allies for war damage. Here Lloyd George did not help matters by promising during the election campaign in November 1918 that he would make Germany pay 'up to the limit of her capacity'. He then established a committee to work out how much this might be and invited the Australian prime minister, Billy Hughes, a noted anti-German hardliner, to chair it. In retrospect this looked like a poor decision.

On 10 December 1918, Hughes announced that Germany should pay almost £25 billion, in annual instalments of £1.2 billion. Lloyd George was horrified by this highly inflated figure, which he called 'a wild and fantastic chimera'. He feared that it would raise unrealistic public expectations. Most other estimates suggested that somewhere between £3 billion and £5 billion would be more appropriate. Even Clemenceau would have been happy with £8 billion.

At one point in the negotiations, Lloyd George received a telegram signed by 370 Conservative MPs urging him to 'stand firm', adding to the pressure on him not to be lenient on Germany. The amount eventually agreed was £6.6 billion, a sum which Germany was to prove completely unable to pay. Lloyd George later claimed that he would have settled for much less but that his hands were tied by public expectations raised by the Hughes Committee.

Source H

Extract from Lloyd George's *War Memoirs*:

I regarded the conclusion of the [Hughes] Report as a wild and fantastic chimera. I was repelled and shocked by the extreme absurdity of this document. In view of the election then proceeding, I decided not to publish it.

Source I

Lloyd George is trying his best to alleviate the terms imposed upon Germany. The French are furious with him nor does Wilson give him any support. Can't understand Wilson. Here is a chance to improve the thing but he won't take it. LG is, however, fighting like a little terrier all by himself.

From *Peacemaking 1919* by British diplomat Harold Nicholson, 1933

Conclusion

Lloyd George had a clear idea of what he wanted to achieve at Versailles — a settlement which would build a lasting peace and one which, while not sparing Germany from losses, would not be so severe on the defeated country that it would sow the seeds of a future war by leaving a bitter legacy of resentment. At times, his negotiating skills were successful, as when he solved the disagreement over the Rhineland. But at others his freedom of movement was too constrained by hardline anti-Germans both at home, like his Conservative coalition partners, and abroad, like Clemenceau.

Overall, despite some victories for Lloyd George, the shape of the Treaty of Versailles was more anti-German than he had hoped for. The outbreak of the Second World War only 20 years later is evidence that he had failed in his central aim of building a lasting peace. HS

4 Study Source H.
a Why do you think Lloyd George criticised the Hughes Report on reparations as 'a wild and fantastic chimera'?
b Do you agree with the author that Lloyd George's appointment of Australian prime minister Billy Hughes to chair the reparations committee 'in retrospect...looked like a poor decision'? Explain your answer.

5 Study Source I.
a Why were the French 'furious' with Lloyd George?
b What indications are there in the source that Nicholson has a favourable opinion of Lloyd George?

6 Write a leading article which might have appeared in a British newspaper in 1919 commenting on the Versailles Conference's decisions on the Rhineland, Upper Silesia and reparations.