Paris Peace Conference and Beyond, 1919–1939

Teaching Pack

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Paris Peace Conference and Beyond, 1919–1939

Introduction

The Paris Peace Conference was held at the end of the First World War to restore peace to Europe and to build a new world order. This collection contains documents relating to that conference and to a number of other important diplomatic endeavours which followed. It showcases the efforts made to settle the messy aftermath of the preceding conflict and to try and ensure a similar situation never arose again.

The outbreak of another world war in 1939 means that this period of peace-making is often viewed as a failure but the reality is considerably more complex. The documents included within this teaching pack explore some of the grandest ambitions of post-war diplomats, from assigning blame for the outbreak of war in 1914, to the settling of borders in the Middle East, to the signing of the Locarno Treaties in 1925, which sought to establish a stable and lasting peace in Europe.

The activities contained within this teaching pack could easily take around **30–40 minutes**, though the exact duration will depend on reading time and the breadth and depth of accompanying discussion.

Learning Objectives

1. Consider how blame for the outbreak of the First World War was assigned, and what effect this had on the ensuing peace negotiations.

2. Explore how the politics and strategy of empire led to a redrawing of the map of the Middle East, with consequences which still persist today.

3. Investigate the discussions preceding the Locarno Treaties and the hopes for a more peaceful future which inspired them.

Historical Background and Context

On 11 November 1918, Germany surrendered and signed an armistice with the Allies, marking the end of the First World War after more than four years of bloody, destructive conflict. The other central powers—Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire—had also exited the war on a similar basis during the previous weeks and months. These armistices were, in reality, only ceasefires, designed to stop the fighting until a more comprehensive peace settlement could be reached.

The Paris Peace Conference, held at the French Foreign Ministry at the Quai d'Orsay, was tasked with developing this settlement. It lasted for a year and involved delegates from 27 nations, though it was dominated by the "Big Four": Great Britain, France, Italy, and the USA. Its most significant outcomes were the five peace treaties handed down by the Allies to the defeated Central Powers, especially the Treaty of Versailles, which Germany signed under duress and with great reluctance.

Despite the scale and longevity of the conference, it left many matters unresolved. Some of these were picked up by the new League of Nations, which first assembled in January 1920, while others became the subject of subsequent diplomatic endeavours, such as the Locarno Treaties of 1925. Taken together, these efforts dramatically reshaped Europe and the world after the First World War, but they also sowed the seeds of future horrors, not least the rise of fascism and the outbreak of another global conflict in 1939.

SOURCE ONE

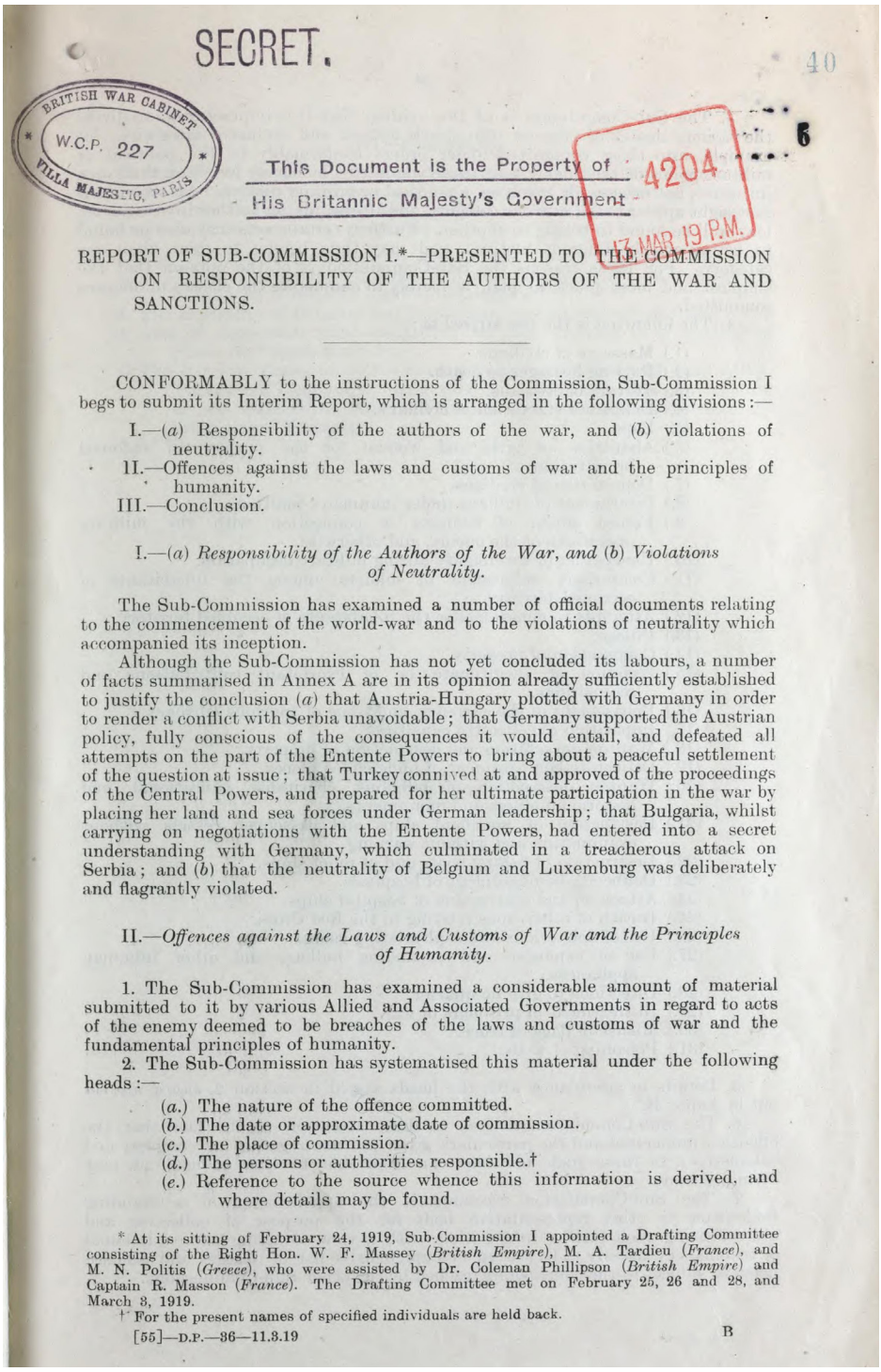
Source Intro

Even today, historians continue to debate which nations or individuals bear the most responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War. This source shows that, as early as 1919, through the deliberations of the Sub-Commission on Responsibility of the Authors of the War, this question was under active consideration by a panel of experts. This was no mere academic exercise, however—those deemed responsible for the war would have to bear the brunt of punitive and reparative measures handed down in the peace treaties.

Source

"Report of Sub-Commission on Responsibility of the Authors of the War and Sanctions", 1919.

FO 608/246/1, images 9–11.



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REPORT OF SUB-COMMISSION I.*—PRESENTED TO THE COMMISSION ON RESPONSIBILITY OF THE AUTHORS OF THE WAR AND SANCTIONS.

CONFORMABLY to the instructions of the Commission, Sub-Commission I begs to submit its Interim Report, which is arranged in the following divisions:—

I.—(*a*) Responsibility of the authors of the war, and (*b*) violations of neutrality.
II.—Offences against the laws and customs of war and the principles of humanity.
III.—Conclusion.

I.—(*a*) *Responsibility of the Authors of the War, and* (*b*) *Violations of Neutrality.*

The Sub-Commission has examined a number of official documents relating to the commencement of the world-war and to the violations of neutrality which accompanied its inception.

Although the Sub-Commission has not yet concluded its labours, a number of facts summarised in Annex A are in its opinion already sufficiently established to justify the conclusion (*a*) that Austria-Hungary plotted with Germany in order to render a conflict with Serbia unavoidable; that Germany supported the Austrian policy, fully conscious of the consequences it would entail, and defeated all attempts on the part of the Entente Powers to bring about a peaceful settlement of the question at issue; that Turkey connived at and approved of the proceedings of the Central Powers, and prepared for her ultimate participation in the war by placing her land and sea forces under German leadership; that Bulgaria, whilst carrying on negotiations with the Entente Powers, had entered into a secret understanding with Germany, which culminated in a treacherous attack on Serbia; and (*b*) that the neutrality of Belgium and Luxemburg was deliberately and flagrantly violated.

II.—*Offences against the Laws and Customs of War and the Principles of Humanity.*

1. The Sub-Commission has examined a considerable amount of material submitted to it by various Allied and Associated Governments in regard to acts of the enemy deemed to be breaches of the laws and customs of war and the fundamental principles of humanity.

2. The Sub-Commission has systematised this material under the following heads:—

(*a.*) The nature of the offence committed.
(*b.*) The date or approximate date of commission.
(*c.*) The place of commission.
(*d.*) The persons or authorities responsible.†
(*e.*) Reference to the source whence this information is derived, and where details may be found.

* At its sitting of February 24, 1919, Sub-Commission I appointed a Drafting Committee consisting of the Right Hon. W. F. Massey (*British Empire*), M. A. Tardieu (*France*), and M. N. Politis (*Greece*), who were assisted by Dr. Coleman Phillipson (*British Empire*) and Captain R. Masson (*France*). The Drafting Committee met on February 25, 26 and 28, and March 3, 1919.

† For the present names of specified individuals are held back.

[55]—D.P.—36—11.3.19

B

3. The Sub-Commission is of the opinion that it is impracticable to divide the various classes of offences into clearly defined and exclusive categories; for example, into those committed under orders conformably to the political or military policy of the enemy, and those committed by enemy forces on their own initiative, not necessarily involving a political or military motive. An act may at first sight appear to fall into one category, and afterwards, on further investigation, may well be found to belong to another. Further, certain acts may also be found to betray widely different motives, and may thus belong to more than one category. For these reasons the Sub-Commission is of the opinion that the simplest and most practical plan is merely to enumerate the classes of offences committed.

4. The following is the list arrived at:—

(1.) Massacre of civilians.
(2.) Putting hostages to death.
(3.) Torture of civilians.
(4.) Deliberate starvation of civilians.
(5.) Rape.
(6.) Abduction of girls and women for the purpose of enforced prostitution.
(7.) Deportation of civilians.
(8.) Internment of civilians under inhuman conditions.
(9.) Forced labour of civilians in connection with the military operations of the enemy, and otherwise.
(10.) Usurpation of sovereignty during military occupation.
(11.) Compulsory enlistment of soldiers among the inhabitants of occupied territory.
(12.) Attempts to denationalise the inhabitants of occupied territory.
(13.) Pillage.
(14.) Confiscation of property.
(15.) Exaction of illegitimate or of exorbitant contributions and requisitions.
(16.) Debasement of the currency, and issue of spurious currency.
(17.) Imposition of collective penalties.
(18.) Wanton devastation and destruction of property.
(19.) Deliberate bombardment of undefended places.
(20.) Wanton destruction of religious, charitable, educational, and historic buildings and monuments.
(21.) Destruction of merchant ships and passenger vessels without examination and without warning.
(22.) Destruction of fishing boats and of relief ships.
(23.) Deliberate bombardment of hospitals.
(24.) Attack on and destruction of hospital ships.
(25.) Breach of other rules relating to the Red Cross.
(26.) Use of deleterious and asphyxiating gases.
(27.) Use of explosive and expanding bullets, and other inhuman appliances.
(28.) Directions to give no quarter.
(29.) Ill-treatment of prisoners of war.
(30.) Misuse of flags of truce.
(31.) Poisoning of wells.

5. Details in accordance with the heads stated in section 2, *supra*, are set out in Annex B.

6. The Sub-Commission desires to draw attention to the fact that the offences enumerated and the particulars given are not regarded as complete and exhaustive; to these such additions can from time to time be made as may seem necessary.

7. The Sub-Commission recommends the appointment of a standing Committee or other representative body for the purpose of collecting and systematising such further information, with a view to laying before a tribunal or tribunals eventually to be set up a comprehensive list of charges and accused persons, subject to the conclusions reached by the other Sub-Commissions.

III.—*Conclusion.*

Having regard to the above considerations and authenticated particulars relative to the inception of the war on the one hand and the conduct of hostilities on the other, the Sub-Commission feels justified in drawing and submitting the following conclusions as facts established:—

1. The war was premeditated by the Central Powers together with their Allies, Turkey and Bulgaria, and was the result of acts deliberately committed in order to make it unavoidable.
2. The neutrality of Belgium and Luxemburg was deliberately violated.
3. Acts of aggression were committed without warning in a number of places on French territory.
4. The war was carried on by the Central Empires together with their Allies, Turkey and Bulgaria, by barbarous or illegitimate methods in violation of the established laws and customs of war and the elementary principles of humanity.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does this source tell us about the balance of power at the Paris Peace Conference? Was the Commission a fair and objective decision-making body?

2. How would this report have been received in both the Allied nations and in the former Central Powers?

3. How did this verdict shape the post-war peace treaties and what impact did it have more widely in the years that followed?

SOURCE TWO

Source Intro

As soon as war broke out between the Allies and the Ottoman Empire, British and French officials began planning for their eventual victory and the collapse of Ottoman power in the Middle East. The maps in this section show some of the plans which were made during the war. When the Ottomans were finally defeated in 1918, the situation, already complex due to the religious and ethnic landscapes of this region, as well as its strategic value, was complicated further by the demands of local populations (many of whom had fought alongside the Allies) for greater autonomy and freedom from imperial subjugation. Nonetheless, Britain and France still sought to implement their wartime plans after the war, with enormous consequences for the Middle East and beyond.

Source

"Maps relating to the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1916–1923".

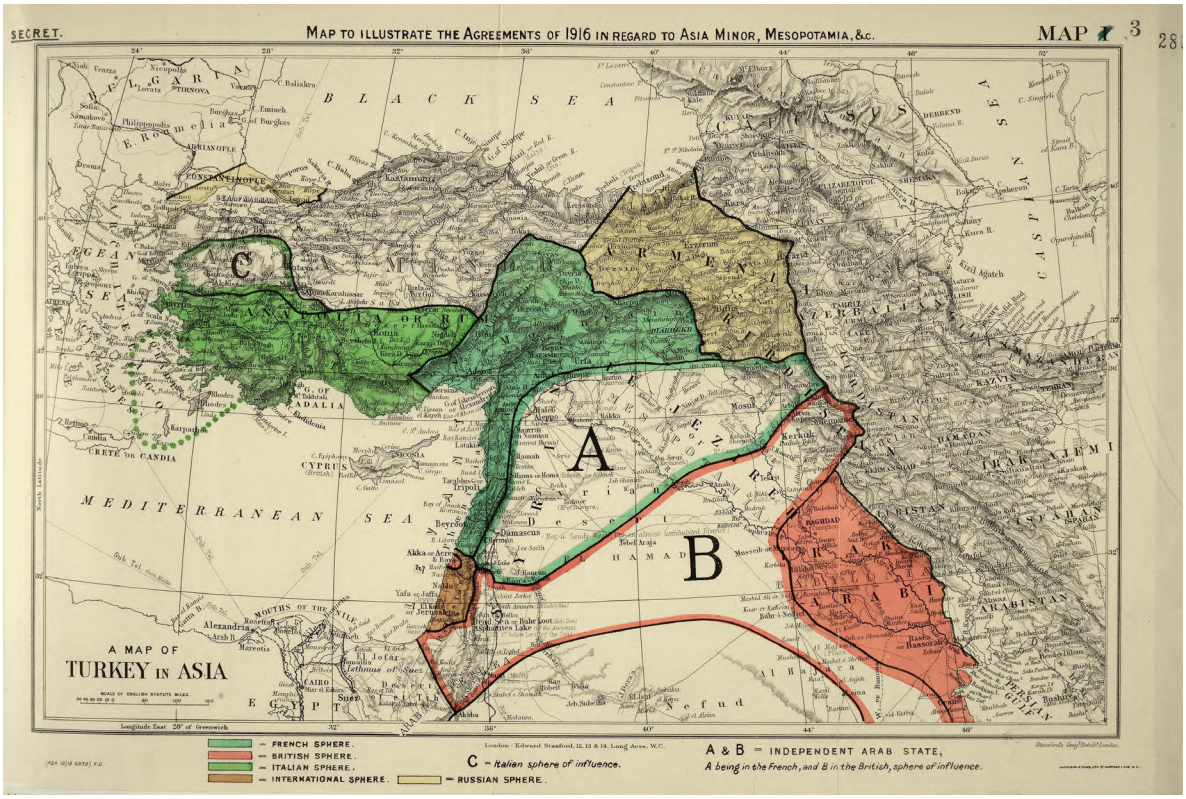
Sykes-Picot Agreement, 1916:

FO 608/96/28, image 10.

MR 1/2014/3, image 24.

Middle East peace map, 1918:

MPI 1/720/1, image 17.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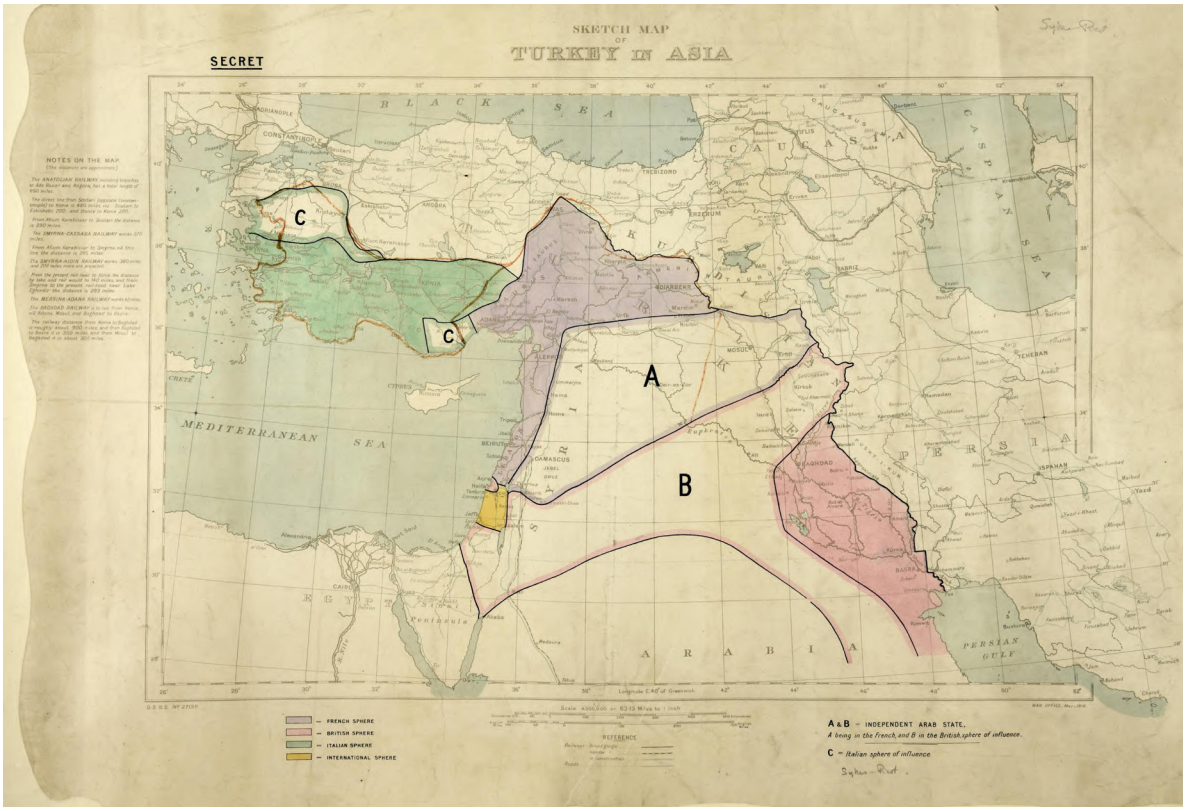
MAP TO ILLUSTRATE THE AGREEMENTS OF 1916 IN REGARD TO ASIA MINOR, MESOPOTAMIA, &c.
MAP 3
A MAP OF
TURKEY IN ASIA
BLACK SEA
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
CASPIAN SEA
CRETE OR CANDIA
CYPRUS
A
B
C
= FRENCH SPHERE.
= BRITISH SPHERE.
= ITALIAN SPHERE.
= INTERNATIONAL SPHERE.
= RUSSIAN SPHERE.
C = Italian sphere of influence.
A & B = INDEPENDENT ARAB STATE,
A being in the French, and B in the British, sphere of influence.

Paris Peace Conference and Beyond, 1919–1939


SECRET
SKETCH MAP
OF
TURKEY IN ASIA
NOTES ON THE MAP
BLACK SEA
CASPIAN SEA
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
PERSIAN GULF
ARABIA
EGYPT
A
B
C
C
FRENCH SPHERE
BRITISH SPHERE
ITALIAN SPHERE
INTERNATIONAL SPHERE
A & B – INDEPENDENT ARAB STATE.
A being in the French, and B in the British, sphere of influence.
C – Italian sphere of influence

Questions for Discussion

1. What were Britain's and France's goals in redrawing the map of the Middle East? Was this little more than an old-fashioned imperial power-grab?

2. How would these changes have been experienced by the local peoples?

3. How significant do you think these decisions have been for the Middle East (and beyond) in the hundred years or so since they were made?

SOURCE THREE

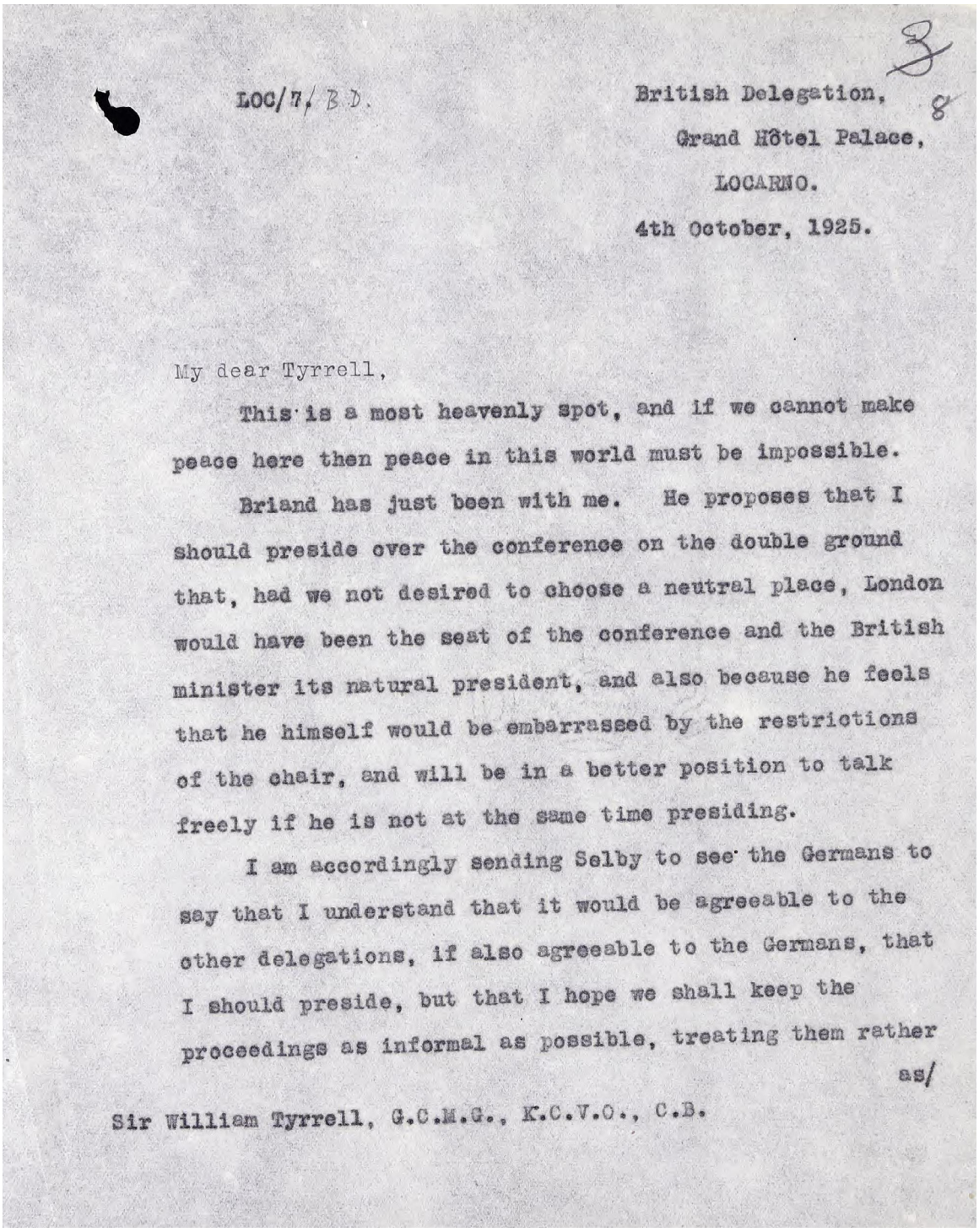
Source Intro

Very soon after the end of the Paris Peace Conference, it became clear to politicians across Europe that the Treaty of Versailles had not satisfactorily resolved many of the most challenging issues generated by the war. To remedy this, diplomats from Germany, France, Britain, Belgium, Italy, Poland, and Czechoslovakia met at Locarno in Switzerland to attempt to find a more lasting solution. This letter from the British Foreign Secretary, Austen Chamberlain, to the Permanent Under-Secretary, William Tyrrell, was written on the day before the formal negotiations began and provides an insight into the mood at the time.

Source

Letter from Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain to Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs William Tyrrell, Locarno, 4 October 1925.

FO 840/1, images 9–13.



LOC/7/B.D.

British Delegation,
Grand Hôtel Palace,
LOCARNO.
4th October, 1925.

My dear Tyrrell,

This is a most heavenly spot, and if we cannot make peace here then peace in this world must be impossible.

Briand has just been with me. He proposes that I should preside over the conference on the double ground that, had we not desired to choose a neutral place, London would have been the seat of the conference and the British minister its natural president, and also because he feels that he himself would be embarrassed by the restrictions of the chair, and will be in a better position to talk freely if he is not at the same time presiding.

I am accordingly sending Selby to see the Germans to say that I understand that it would be agreeable to the other delegations, if also agreeable to the Germans, that I should preside, but that I hope we shall keep the proceedings as informal as possible, treating them rather as/

Sir William Tyrrell, G.C.M.G., K.C.V.O., C.B.

as conversations between the foreign ministers than as a formal conference, and indeed discussing with the same freedom and absence of formality as characterised the conversations between Briand and myself in London.

Briand told me that he was a little preoccupied by Chicherin's activities. He heard that Bernstorff had been saying at Geneva that Chicherin was attempting to form a Russo-German-Polish combination, to include also Italy and extending to Turkey and China, and Briand/~~he~~ thought Mussolini had been lending some countenance to the idea. Skrzynski had consulted Briand/~~him~~ before receiving Chicherin, and he had encouraged him to do so, saying that Poland had every interest in getting on good terms with Russia if she could. Her situation between Russia and Germany was obviously dangerous, and her relations with Germany could only be facilitated and the prospects of our negotiations improved if Germany felt that there was no likelihood of Russia making trouble for Poland in the rear. Indeed, if Poland had nothing to fear from Russia, it might help to dispel from the minds of the Germans their night-mare of a French army/

army marching across Germany to the relief of Poland (an idea which Briand observed no Frenchman contemplated).

Upon the whole, Briand is not sorry that Mussolini is not here, and he feels that the beauty of the view from the terrace from which I am writing more than compensates for the absence of the Prime Minister of Italy!

I had a few words with Briand about Turkey and Mosul. I told him that I was not greatly disturbed by the Turkish threats, and did not anticipate serious trouble if the League gave a satisfactory decision, but I had been greatly concerned by Unden's proceedings and proposals, and I trusted that Briand himself would make a point of presiding at the Council whenever the question came up again, as it was of too great consequence to be left even to the most distinguished remplaçant.

I took the opportunity to add some observations on the common danger to both France and Great Britain of allowing the Turks again to get a hold upon the Arabs. Briand warmly agreed, but he said he was not sorry that a decision was being delayed for a little. He thought that the Turks would/

would be easier to deal with when the trouble in Syria had been ended. This would not now take long, and he might tell me in confidence that he then intended to recall Sarrail and to send out a civilian governor, whose administration would be conciliatory rather than authoritative. He spoke strongly of the outrageous attitude adopted by Unden, which he was inclined to impute to German influence, the Germans hoping that if they could obtain from the Council a decision so thoroughly unsatisfactory to us that it would make trouble between the French and ourselves and generally embroil the situation to their advantage.

I also have been inclined to suspect that German influence played a part in Unden's obliquities, and I am inclined to add another motive for their conduct in the hope which they may possibly cherish of our throwing up the mandate, and of Germany then obtaining it on her entry into the League with the position that that would give her on the line of the old Bagdad railway, and in immediate proximity with Turkey.

I told Briand of what Skrzynski had said to Max Müller about Benes' overture to Germany, and of my reply. I added

that/

that I entirely approved the advice which he had given to Skrzynski about Russia, and that it was no part of the British policy to embroil the relations of Poland and her neighbours on either side, but that on the contrary we should be very glad to see them improved.

Briand observed that Skrzynski's remark about Benes' gaffe was partly inspired by jealousy.

Please show this letter to the Prime Minister. I do not think there is anything in it of sufficient interest to make it worth circulating to the Cabinet.

The Germans have accepted the proposal that I should preside to-morrow without prejudice to discussion of a rotation afterwards among all the Powers.

Yours sincerely,

(Signed) AUSTEN CHAMBERLAIN.

Questions for Discussion

1. What can this source tell us about Chamberlain's and the British delegation's hopes, ambitions, and objectives for the Locarno negotiations?

2. Does it suggest that there was a widespread constructive attitude to peace in Europe at this time, or was each country still seeking only to further their own interests?

3. How important were individuals and personalities to the course and outcome of these interwar diplomatic endeavours?

Questions for General Discussion

The following questions are designed to prompt a wider discussion on the events, issues, and themes highlighted in the sources.

1. How accurate is it to describe the post-First World War peace-making process as “doomed to fail”?

2. What were the principal challenges faced by the victorious Allies when they assembled in Paris in 1919, and how did they seek to overcome them?

3. What could the diplomats and policy-makers of the interwar period have done differently to ensure a more secure and lasting peace for Europe and the world?

4. How fair is it to blame the Paris and Locarno peace-makers for the outbreak of another world war in 1939?

5. What lessons can diplomats today learn from the successes and failures of the Paris Peace Conference?

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