

To what extent was European diplomacy in the period 1919-39 shaped by the Paris Peace Conference?

After the First World War, the powers held the Paris Peace Conference to discuss how the defeated countries would be dealt with. At this conference, they formulated the Fourteen Points and signed several peace treaties, including the Versailles Treaty for Germany and the Saint-Germain Treaty for Austria. These created the European diplomatic climate in the next twenty years in political, military and other ways. Therefore, what the question suggests is valid to a large extent.

Politically speaking, the Paris Peace Conference contributed to Britain and French dominance in European order during 1919-39. After the conference, Germany and Austria were bound by punitive treaties and their national strength was greatly weakened. For example, the Treaty of Versailles required Germany to pay US\$33 billion in reparations and forfeit more than 10% of its population and territory, and the Treaty of Saint-Germain separated the Austro-Hungarian Empire into Austria and Hungary. As a result, these two countries could no longer compete with Britain and France, passing the responsibility of managing international order to them. For instance, Britain acted as a guarantor in the Locarno Conference of 1925 to make sure all signatories adhere to the Pact, and France urged other countries to sign the Kellogg-Briand Pact in Paris in 1928 and took the lead with international affairs. In addition, America suggested at the Paris Peace Conference the Fourteen Points, one of which was to establish a peacekeeping organization, but it did not join the League of Nations due to opposition from the Congress. This made Britain and France the leaders of the League and linked the effectiveness of the League closely to the national power of these two countries. For example, after their decline in the 1930s, the League became unsuccessful in stopping invasions, including the Italian one against Albania (1939). This shows that the decline of the League in the 1930s was also indirectly caused by the Paris Peace Conference. Therefore, the diplomatic situation with American and French dominance in international affairs during 1919-39 was shaped by the conference.

Politically, the decisions made at the Paris Peace Conference were the fundamental reason for the diplomatic situation in which Fascist ideologies rose in Europe and undermined peace during 1919-39. Since democratic nations such as Britain and France forced Germany to accept the humiliating Versailles Treaty and sole responsibility for its 'war guilt', the Weimar Republic government, which signed this treaty when freshly established, failed to gain popular support. This contributed to the rise of Hitler from the Nazi Party in 1933. Worse still, the Paris Peace Conference neglected the balance of power principle and formed small nation states exemplified by Poland and Czechoslovakia. Being weak in both economic and military senses, these small nations were likely to fall prey to aggression. For example, in 1939, Germany annexed the whole of Czechoslovakia without having to fight and launched a sudden attack against Poland. It is clear that the arrangements at the conference also paved the way for Germany's expansionist diplomatic policy in the 1930s. In addition, benefiting from the fact that Italy was not given Fiume and Dalmatia as promised at the Paris Peace Conference, Mussolini from the Fascist Party managed to come into power amid discontentment, and he started invasions later to consolidate Italy's international status, including the Corfu bombardment in 1923. It can be understood that the rise of Fascist ideologies and the subsequent invasions in Europe during 1919-39 were rooted in the inappropriate arrangements made at the Paris Peace Conference.

In military aspect, the Paris Peace Conference caused the diplomatic situation with both disarmament and military expansion during 1919-39. First of all, arms limitation was one of the Fourteen Points proposed at the Paris Peace Conference. Therefore, European countries had made great efforts regarding disarmament and shaped the diplomatic situation with concerted disarmament attempts. For example, Britain held the London Naval Conference in 1930 that required the participating countries to hold back their naval development, and the League of Nations launched the Geneva Disarmament Conference in 1932 in the hope of achieving common disarmament in Europe. Secondly, the arrangements at the Paris Peace Conference were also the basis for military expansion in the 1930s. The Treaty of Versailles required Germany to cut its army to 100,000 soldiers and forbade it from possessing submarines or an air force, prompting Germany to insist on not disarming at the Geneva Conference afterwards. Moreover, Germany, discontented with the terms about disarmament in the Versailles Treaty, breached the treaty in 1935 by re-introducing conscription. This induced fear among other European countries of Germany's reviving military power and prompted them to give up disarmament and start military expansion. Therefore, the arrangements made at the Paris Peace Conference were the main factor shaping European military diplomacy in the interwar period.

Although there were other factors affecting European diplomacy in the period 1919-39, they were not as important as the impact of the Paris Peace Conference.

Firstly, the economic factor affected European diplomacy in the period concerned but the Paris Peace Conference gave greater impact. Economic interests were an important factor influencing diplomatic policy. For example, when Germany failed to continue its war reparation payments to France and Belgium in 1923, they immediately sent army to the German Ruhr area and caused the Ruhr Crisis. In addition, when the Great Depression took place in 1929, America withdrew its loans for Germany and, as a consequence, the number of people unemployed in Germany reached 6 million. This led to the rise of Hitler, who started frequent invasions for ‘living space’ such as the invasion of Poland in 1939 in order to get a greater population, more resources and new territories. Therefore, the economic factor greatly influenced the foreign relationships and diplomatic policies of many countries. But the Paris Peace Conference still had greater impact. In terms of causality, the conference affected the economic relationships between those countries after 1919. As for the abovementioned Ruhr Crisis, it was the Treaty of Versailles that required Germany to pay unreasonably high reparations totaling US\$33 billion that overwhelmed Germany and caused this incident. In addition, it was also the massive indemnity demanded by the Treaty of Versailles that prompted Germany to borrow money from America through plans like the Dawes Plan. This made it possible for the Great Depression to impact on Germany and lead to its expansionist diplomatic policy. Therefore, the root cause should be the impact of the Paris Peace Conference.

Secondly, the nationalist factor also affected European diplomacy during 1919-39 in a way less important than the Paris Peace Conference. In order to get national glory and achieve national unity, some countries adopted expansionist diplomatic policy. For example, Italy started territorial expansion in the hope of regaining the national glory of ancient Rome and forced Yugoslavia to cede Fiume in 1924, while Germany annexed Austria and demanded Czechoslovakia to give up the Sudetenland in 1938 for the sake of national unity. The nationalist factor definitely affected European diplomacy and caused the advent of expansionist policy. However, the impact of the Paris Peace Conference was more important in terms of causality. As for Italy, it was because Britain and France failed to keep their promise to Italy and gave only Tyrol and Istria instead, that Italian nationalism was fueled by disaffection of the Italian and expansionist diplomatic policy was adopted. As for Germany, the principle of 'national self-determination' was laid down at the Paris Peace Conference together with the establishment of nation states such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, but the Versailles Treaty banned the union of Germany and Austria of the same race while the Treaty of Saint-Germain even granted the Sudetenland of 3 million Germanic population to Czechoslovakia. Because of that, Germany under Hitler's leadership adopted expansionist diplomatic policy and started invasions to get back areas inhabited by Germanic people. Therefore, the Paris Peace Conference should be of greater importance.

In conclusion, the Paris Peace Conference was the main factor influencing European diplomacy during 1919-39, and it was the bad arrangements at the conference that paved the way for the Second World War that took place only twenty years after WW1.

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English Version – Other Factor Point 3

Thirdly, the ideological factor wasn't that significant in shaping European diplomacy in 1919-39. During the First World War, the Communist revolution successfully revoked the Tsar regime and was established as the first communist country. However, capitalist countries greatly feared the spread of communism, and were afraid that communism would overwhelm the capitalist regime and harm the free world. Therefore, Britain and France had distanced away from communist Soviet Union after war, like not inviting Soviet Union to enter the League of Nations in 1920. In the 1930s, Britain and France even wanted to use Germany to check Soviet Union, so they adopted the appeasement policy, like giving Sudetenland to Czechoslovakia in the 1938 Munich Conference, "redirecting troubles to the east", directing German aggression to the east Soviet Union. Redirecting German aggression to east Soviet Union showed that the ideological factor also shaped the diplomatic situation between communist and capitalist countries. However, the Paris Peace Conference was more important. In terms of the limitation of the ideological factor, although France and the Soviet Union belonged to the capitalist and communist countries respectively, both countries signed the "Treaty of Mutual Assistance" in 1935 and thought of checking Germany under the rule of Hitler. Anti-communist Nazi Germany also signed the "Nazi-Soviet Non Aggression Pact" with the Soviet Union, that both sides should not attack each other, reflecting the limitation of the ideology impact. In terms of root, it is based on the improper arrangements to Germany and Italy in the Paris Peace Conference, ultimately leading to the rise of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, and therefore overwhelming the European diplomatic situation, like prompting Britain and France to adopt the Appeasement Policy, and even the outbreak of the Second World War. Therefore, the Paris Peace Conference is the root factor influencing European diplomacy in 1919-39.