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someone or something pay. After every European war the losers had lost territory or property such as art work. They had also frequently paid fines (often called indemnities) or, in some cases, reparations for the damage their forces had done. The difficulty with the Great War was that the damage was so great and the strength of public feeling so strong, that the potential bill to be presented to the losing side was astronomical. David Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, and Clemenceau knew that they had little chance of extracting vast payments from the defeated nations, but they dared not say so publically for fear of losing political support. They also had to deal with Wilson, who had made it clear in public statements that he would not support punitive fines.

In the Allied countries, before the peace conference met, there was as well considerable enthusiasm for punishing the leaders of the Central Powers, in particular those of Germany which had been the dominant partner. There was talk of trying Kaiser Wilhelm II, who, after one last bombastic speech about dying at the head of his troops, had gone off ignominiously by train to a comfortable refuge in the Netherlands. Lloyd George toyed with the idea of sending him, as the British had done with Napoleon, to an island, perhaps in the Falklands. In the end the Dutch government refused to hand him over.

Public opinion, contradictorily and confusingly, also wanted a better world. Many on the allied side, and indeed among the defeated countries, felt that the sacrifices, the waste in human and other terms of the First World War, would only make sense if the world moved on to find ways of preventing future wars and to build fairer societies. Wilson, although he expressed ideas which many Europeans had been talking about for a generation, came to be seen as the spokesman for such hopes. In his great wartime speeches, particularly that in which he laid out his Fourteen Points, he sketched out a new sort of international relations, where countries dealt openly with each other, where armaments were reduced to the bare minimum for safety, where trade barriers fell and the ships of the world travelled the seas without interference, and where a new type of organization, a league of nations, brought its members collective security.