

The Treaty of Versailles - An Overview

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Signed on June 28th, 1919 as an end to the [First World War](#), The Treaty of Versailles was supposed to ensure a lasting peace by punishing Germany and setting up a League of Nations to solve diplomatic problems. Instead, it left a legacy of political and geographical difficulties which have often been blamed, sometimes solely, for starting the Second World War.

BACKGROUND:

The First World War has been fought for four years when, on November 11th, 1918, Germany and the Allies signed an armistice.

The Allies soon gathered to discuss the peace treaty they would sign, but Germany and Austria-Hungary weren't invited; instead they were only allowed to present a response to the treaty, a response which was largely ignored. Instead, terms were drawn up mainly by the 'Big Three': British Prime Minister Lloyd George, French Prime Minister Frances Clemenceau, and US President Woodrow Wilson.

THE BIG THREE

Each had different desires:

- Woodrow Wilson: Wanted a 'fair and lasting peace' and had written a plan – the [Fourteen Points](#) – to achieve this. He wanted the armed forces of all nations reduced, not just the losers, and a League of Nations created to ensure peace.
- Frances Clemenceau: Wanted Germany to pay dearly for the war, including being stripped of land, industry and their armed forces. Also wanted heavy reparations.
- Lloyd George: While he personally agreed with Wilson, he was affected by public opinion in Britain which agreed with Clemenceau.

The result was a treaty which tried to compromise, and many of the details were passed down to un-coordinated sub-committees to work out, which thought they were drafting a starting point, rather than the final wording. It was an almost impossible task, with the need to pay off loans and debts with German cash and goods, but also to restore the pan-European economy; the need to sate territorial demands, many of which were included in secret treaties, but also allow self-determination and deal with growing nationalism; the need to remove the German threat, but not humiliate the nation and breed a generation intent on revenge, all while mollifying voters.

Discussion Question #1: Why did the “Big Three” have differing views about what to do with the Germany problem?

SELECTED TERMS OF THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES

Territory:

- Alsace-Lorraine, captured by Germany in 1870 and the war aim of the attacking French forces in 1914, was returned to France.
- The Saar, an important German coalfield, was to be given to France for 15 years, after which a plebiscite would decide ownership.
- Poland became an independent country with a 'route to the sea', a corridor of land cutting Germany in two.
- Danzig, a major port in East Prussia (Germany) was to be under international rule.
- All German and Turkish Colonies were taken away and put under Allied control.
- Finland, Lithuania, Latvia and Czechoslovakia were made independent.
- Austria-Hungary was split up and Yugoslavia was created.

Arms:

- The left bank of the Rhine was to be occupied by Allied forces and the right bank demilitarized.
- The German army was cut to 100,000 men.
- Wartime weapons were to be scrapped.
- The German Navy was cut to 36 ships and no submarines.
- Germany was banned from having an Air Force
- An anschluss (union) between Germany and Austria was banned.

Reparations and Guilt:

- In the 'war guilt' clause Germany has to accept total blame for the war.
- Germany had to pay £6,600 million in compensation.

The League of Nations:

- A League of Nations was to be created to prevent further world conflict.

REACTIONS

Germany lost 13% of its land, 12% of its people, 48% of its iron resources, 15% of its agricultural production and 10% of its coal. Perhaps understandably, German public opinion soon swung against this 'Diktat' (dictated peace), while the Germans who signed it were called the 'November Criminals'. Britain and France felt the treaty was fair – they actually wanted harsher terms imposed on the Germans – but the United States refused to ratify it because they didn't want to be part of the League of Nations.

RESULTS

- The map of Europe was redrawn with consequences which, especially in the Balkans, remain to the modern day.
- Numerous countries were left with large minorities groups: there were three and a half million Germans in Czechoslovakia alone.
- The League of Nations was fatally weakened without the United States and its army to enforce decisions.
- Many Germans felt unfairly treated. After all, they had just signed an armistice, not a unilateral surrender, and the allies hadn't occupied deep into Germany.

MODERN THOUGHTS

Modern historians sometimes conclude that the treaty was more lenient than might have been expected, and not really unfair. They argue that, while the treaty didn't stop another war, this was more due to massive fault lines in Europe which WW1 failed to solve, and they argue that the treaty would have worked had the allied nations enforced it, instead of falling out and being played off one another. This remains a controversial view. You rarely find a modern historian agreeing that the Treaty solely **caused World War Two**, although clearly it failed in its aim to prevent another major war. What is certain is that **Hitler** was able to **use the Treaty perfectly** to rally support behind him: **appealing to soldiers** who felt conned, wielding the anger at the November Criminals to damn other socialists, promise to overcome Versailles and make headway in doing so...

However, supporters of Versailles like to look at the peace treaty Germany imposed on soviet Russia, which took vast areas of land, population, and wealth, and point out they were no less keen to grab things. Whether one wrong justifies another is, of course, down to the reader.

Discussion Question #2: Do you think the limits placed on Germany following WWI were fair?