

Treaty of Versailles

The Treaty of Versailles was intended to be a peace agreement between the Allies and the Germans. Versailles created political discontent and economic chaos in Germany. The Peace Treaty of Versailles represented the results of hostility and revenge and opened the door for a dictator and World War II. November 11, 1918 marked the end of the first World War. Germany had surrendered and signed an armistice agreement.

The task of forming a peace agreement was now in the hands of the Allies. In December of 1918, the Allies met in Versailles to start on the peace settlement.² The main countries and their respective representatives were: The United States, Woodrow Wilson; Great Britain, David Lloyd George; and France, George Clemenceau. "At first, it had seemed the task of making peace would be easy".³ However, once the process started, the Allies found they had conflicting ideas and motives surrounding the reparations and wording of the Treaty of Versailles. It seemed the Allies had now found themselves engaged in another battle. Woodrow Wilson (1856 - 1924), the twenty-eighth President of the United States (1913 --1921).⁴ In August of 1914, when World War I began, there was no question that the United States would remain neutral. "Wilson didn't want to enter the European War or any other war for that matter".⁵ However, as the war continued, it became increasingly obvious that the United States could no longer 'sit on the sidelines'. German submarines had sunk American tankers and the British liner, 'Lusitania', in May 1915, killing almost twelve hundred people, including 128 Americans.⁶ This convinced Wilson to enter World War I, on the allied side. As the war continued, Wilson outlined his peace program, which was centered around fourteen main points. "They (fourteen points) were direct and simple: a demand that future agreements be open covenants of peace, openly arrived at; an insistence upon absolute freedom of the seas; and, as the fourteenth point, the formation of a general association of nations."⁷ The fourteen points gave people a hope of peace and lay the groundwork for the armistice that Germany ultimately signed in November 1918. Although the United States was instrumental in ending the war, Wilson was still more interested in a "peace without victors"⁸ than annexing German colonies or reparations (payment for war damages). However, as the Allies began discussions of the peace treaty, the European allies rejected Wilson's idealism and reasoning. It soon became increasingly obvious that the allies were seeking revenge and Germany was destined to be crippled economically and socially by its enemies. David Lloyd George (1863 - 1945), who was the Prime Minister of Great Britain (1916 - 1922), governed through the latter part of the war and the early post war years.⁹ Britain and Germany were, historically, always rivals. Before the war, for instance, Germany challenged Britain's famous powerful and unstoppable navy by dramatically increasing the amount of money spent on their navy. In terms of losses, Britain absorbed thirty-six percent of the debt incurred by the allies and seventeen percent of the war's total casualties.¹⁰ After the war, Britain faced tough economic problems. Their exports were at an all time low due to outdated factories, high tariffs, and competition from other countries. As a direct result, Britain suffered from high unemployment, which of course, affected the well being of the country. Britain had its pride and nationalism stripped. The Treaty of Versailles would provide an opportunity to seek revenge for their losses. They were also seeking annexation of German colonies in Africa. Georges Clemenceau (1841 - 1929) was the Premier of France (1906-1909) and (1917-1920).¹¹ As Britain, France had a rivalry with Germany but the French's ill feelings were even more intensive. "Nationalism created tensions between France and

Germany. The French bitterly resented their defeat in the Franco - Prussian War and were eager to seek revenge. Moreover, they were determined to regain Alsace - Lorraine."¹² This gave the French the motivation of increasing their military strength and ultimately, destroying their life-long enemies. During the war, France's portion of the war debt amounted to twenty percent. Their loss, in terms of war casualties, was thirty-three percent.¹³ Most of the battles were fought on French soil. This resulted in the destruction of "ten million farm acres, twenty thousand factories and six thousand public buildings".¹⁴ After the war, France suffered terribly, economically. Inflation and a deflated French Franc spurred the French to take advantage of the armistice. "Clemenceau wanted revenge as well as security against any future German attack."¹⁵ He also wanted a huge amount of reparations, to annex the coal rich Saar Basin, the return of Alsace - Lorraine and an independent Rhineland for a buffer zone between Germany and France. All the leaders had different opinions and motives regarding the Treaty of Versailles. Coming to a consensus was difficult. The Treaty had to be revised several times before the final copy was signed on January 18, 1919. "There was scarcely a section of the treaty which was not attacked, just as there was scarcely a section of the treaty which was not attacked."¹⁶ The German's were reluctant to agree to such harsh terms. "Even the most humble German was appalled by the severity of the treaty."¹⁷ France and Britain were both eager to have revenge on Germany but selfishly wanted each other's benefits.

"Clemenceau pointed out that the British were making no effort to placate the Germans at the expense of British interests. They offered no proposals to reduce the number of German ships to be handed over, or to return Germany's colonies, or to restore the German Navy, or to remove the restrictions on Germany's overseas trade. Instead, it was always at the expense of French interest that concessions were to be made."¹⁸ Wilson thought both France and Britain were being too vindictive and unreasonable. The allies used Wilson's Fourteen Points program to convince Germany to sign an armistice. However, once Germany complied, these points were ignored. "The French, for example, had no intention of abandoning what Wilson castigated as the "old diplomacy," with its secret understandings and interlocking alliances."¹⁹ Therefore, in the end, the European Allies, including France and Britain, received what they wanted from the treaty. "The actual costs, for Germany, included: the guilt of the entire war and, paying 132 billion gold marks in reparations. Germany also lost one eighth of its land, all of its colonies, all of its overseas financial assets and limiting their once powerful military."²⁰ Britain and France would receive large sums of the reparations and German colonies in Africa as mandates.²¹ France also received its wishes with Alsace-Lorraine. "France would recover Alsace-Lorraine outright."²²

However, the main delight for France and Britain was seeing Germany suffer. The biggest problem Germany had with Versailles was the war guilt, which was stated in article 231 of the Versailles Treaty. The Allies were astonished to find this particular paragraph was the most violently disputed point in the entire treaty. Article 231 stated: "The Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies."²³ It seems weird that they would treat Germany that way after they too had been in the war. Fighting and killing were done by both sides but only the Germans were punished. "If our army and our workmen had known that peace would look like this, the army would not have laid down its arms and all would have held out to the end."²⁴ All Germany became very upset about the whole treaty. "This aroused intense

nationalist bitterness in Germany."25 The future looked grim and had no cause for optimism in the near future. After Versailles was 'in stone', Germany became a very weak country, seeking to avenge the vindictiveness and total lack of empathy shown by the allies. "The German people could not resist, but, in unanimity, they could still hate."26 Germany suffered from great economic problems after the war. They had already lost many lives and things during the war, but now they were responsible for paying the reparations. The Germans tried paying their debts by borrowing and printing more money. They were shocked to find that incredible inflation was the result. "The hardships caused by the inflation of the 1920's contributed to the political unrest of Germany after WWI."27 After the war, Germany became a republic (called the Weimar Republic). The Weimar Republic had many problems from the very beginning. "Many Germans despised it (the Republic) because its representatives had signed the hated Versailles Treaty."28 There were revolts by both a communism party and a fascism party. In the end, the fascists party was favoured because "they were extreme nationalists, who denounced the Versailles Treaty and opposed the democratic goals of the Weimar Republic."29 With the rise of fascism came the rise of Hitler and his Nazi Party. Adolph Hitler, of the Nazi Party, preached a racist brand of fascism. His party "kept expanding, benefiting from growing unemployment, fear of communism, Hitler's self-certainty, and the difference of his political rivals."30 When Hitler became chancellor in January 1933, he began rebuilding a promising future for Germany.31 He promised jobs and benefits to all classes of people. Almost all Germans felt compelled to listen and obey Hitler's extreme ideas of fascism because for some, he was their last hope. Hitler knew how to win people's obedience, through their fears and insecurities. "Hitler successfully appealed to a Germany that was humiliated by defeat in World War I and the Treaty of Versailles of 1919."32 Hitler succeeded and began to regain Germany's strength. "Germany was too powerful to be suppressed for long."33 Hitler broke many rules contained in the Treaty of Versailles. For example, Hitler sent troops into the demilitarized Rhineland and the French did not respond. This and scenarios gave Hitler the incentive to invade other countries and ultimately, invade Poland and started World War II. With WWII came the dreadful horrors of the Holocaust. Hitler had ordered the deaths of at least five million Jews.34 Not only did he orchestrate these mass murders, but he also influenced countless individuals to think and act in the same disgraceful manner. Hitler may have had sick and shameful ideas but he certainly knew how to be a manipulative leader. He played on the fears and insecurities of the people and used their weaknesses to win their loyalty. In conclusion, The Treaty of Versailles was supposed to represent the peaceful ending to World War I, however, it became the prelude to another war. It was originally an effort to restore order and provide a peaceful conclusion to World War I. The ill feelings and economic upheaval that resulted provided the perfect climate for Hitler's dominance, in post-war Germany. The contributors/participants of Versailles had other motives behind the 'peace agreement' other than a peace settlement. Their selfish actions resulted in, not only the economic hardship of Germany, but inflation and unemployment in all of Europe. The severity of the reparations contained in this document set the stage for history to repeat itself. "Therefore, the very way in which the Treaty of Versailles was forced on the German people stored up the material for the next round."35