

• The impact of the Treaty of Versailles

After the First World War, all of the defeated nations were assigned their own peace treaties, comprising reparations terms. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was split up, with new nations created, such as Czechoslovakia, and separate treaties were imposed on Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey. However, it was the Treaty of Versailles, presented to Germany, which was to shape the course of events in Europe in the coming decades.

German objections to the treaty

The terms of the treaty were announced on 7 May to a horrified German nation. Germany was to lose:

- 10 per cent of its land
- all of its overseas colonies
- 12.5 per cent of its population
- 16 per cent of its coalfields and almost half of its iron and steel industry.

Its army was reduced to 100,000 men. It could have no air force, and only a tiny navy. Worst of all, Germany had to accept the blame for starting the war and would therefore pay reparations.

The overall reaction of Germans was one of outrage. They certainly did not feel they had started the war. They did not even feel they had lost the war. In 1919 many Germans did not really understand how bad Germany's military situation had been at the end of the conflict. They believed that the German government had simply agreed to a ceasefire, and that therefore Germany should have been at the Paris Peace Conference to negotiate peace. They were angry that their government was not represented at the talks and that they were being forced to accept a harsh treaty without any choice.

At first, the new government refused to sign the treaty and the German navy sank its own ships in protest. At one point, it looked as though war might break out again. But what could the German leader Ebert do? He consulted the army commander, Hindenburg, who made it clear that Germany could not possibly win, but indicated that as a soldier he would prefer to die fighting.

Ebert was in an impossible position. How could he inflict war and certain defeat on his people? Reluctantly, he agreed to accept the terms of the treaty and it was signed on 28 June 1919.

War guilt and reparations

The 'war guilt' clause was particularly hated. Germans felt at the very least that blame should be shared. What made matters worse, however, was that because Germany was forced to accept blame for the war, it was also expected to pay for all the damage caused by it. The German economy was already in tatters. People had very little food. They feared that the reparations payments would cripple them. As Source 12 shows, there was little sympathy for them among their former enemies.

When Germany failed to pay its reparations in 1922–23, French and Belgian troops took over the Ruhr, Germany's main industrial area. This was completely legal under the treaty (see Chapter 2 on Germany, pages 60–1 for more details).

SOURCE 10

From *Deutsche Zeitung* (German News), on the day the treaty was signed.

Today in the Hall of Mirrors the disgraceful Treaty is being signed. Do not forget it! The German people will, with unceasing labour, press forward to reconquer the place among the nations to which it is entitled.

SOURCE 11

From *Peacemakers*, by Professor Margaret Macmillan of the University of Toronto, published in 2001.

The mistake the Allies made, and it did not become clear until much later, was that, as a result of the armistice terms, the great majority of Germans never experienced their country's defeat at first hand. Except in the Rhineland, they did not see occupying troops. The Allies did not march in triumph to Berlin, as the Germans had done in Paris in 1871. In 1918 German soldiers marched home in good order, with crowds cheering their way; in Berlin, Friedrich Ebert, the new president, greeted them with 'No enemy has conquered you'!

SOURCE 12

Headlines and article from the British newspaper the *People*, 25 May 1919.

ALLIES STERN REPLY TO HUNS.

Terms of Peace Treaty Better Than Germany Deserves.

WAR-MAKERS MUST BE MADE TO SUFFER

The Allies have made a stern and uncompromising reply to Rantzau's pleas that German industry will be ruined and her population rendered destitute by the economic terms of the Peace Treaty.

The reply points out that the terms have been determined by Germany's capacity to pay, not by her guilt; and the Huns are reminded that as they were responsible for the war they must suffer the consequences as well as other nations.

The German Delegation has left for Spa to consult with their Government, probably with the idea of arranging a means for 'saving their face', as it is now believed they will sign the Treaty.

THINK

- 1 How would you describe the tone of Source 10?
- 2 How does Source 11 help to explain the attitude shown in Source 10?

PRACTICE QUESTION 1

Source 13 is criticising Germany's complaints about the Treaty of Versailles. How do you know?

Explain your answer by using Source 13 and your contextual knowledge.

SOURCE 13

A cartoon from *Punch* magazine, 1919.



THE RECKONING.

PAN-GERMAN: "MONSTROUS, I CALL IT. WHY, IT'S FULLY A QUARTER OF WHAT WE SHOULD HAVE MADE THEM PAY, IF WE'D WON."

Disarmament

The disarmament terms upset Germans. An army of 100,000 was very small for a country of Germany's size and the army was a symbol of German pride. Despite Wilson's Fourteen Points calling for disarmament, none of the Allies disarmed to the extent that Germany was disarmed in the 1920s. It is no great surprise that Adolf Hitler received widespread approval for his actions when he rebuilt Germany's armed forces in 1935.

German territories

Germany certainly lost a lot of territory. This was a major blow to German pride, and to its economy. Both the Saar and Upper Silesia were important industrial areas. Meanwhile, as Germany was losing land, the British and French were increasing their empires by taking control of German and Turkish territories in Africa and the Middle East.

The Fourteen Points were not reflected in the treaty

To most Germans, the treatment of Germany was not in keeping with Wilson's Fourteen Points. For example, while self-determination was given to countries such as Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, German-speaking peoples were being divided by the terms forbidding *ANSCHLUSS* with Austria or hived off into new countries such as Czechoslovakia to be ruled by non-Germans.

Germany felt further insulted by not being invited to join the League of Nations, an organisation which had been set out in the last of the Fourteen Points.

PRACTICE QUESTION 2

Write an account of how land lost by Germany in 1919 caused anger among Germans.

'Double standards'?

German complaints about the treaty fell on deaf ears. In particular, many people felt that the Germans were themselves operating a double standard. Their call for fairer treatment did not square with the harsh way they had treated Russia in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918. Versailles was much less harsh a treaty than Brest-Litovsk.

There was also the fact that Germany's economic problems, although real, were partly self-inflicted. Other states had raised taxes to pay for the war. The KAISER's government planned to pay war debts by extracting reparations from the defeated states.

Reactions of the Allies: Strengths and weaknesses of the settlement

The Treaty of Versailles is one of history's most controversial events. As you have seen, it was bitterly criticised by most Germans in 1919. The treaty was blamed for all of the major problems that Germany faced over the next few years: a revolution; strikes; an invasion; HYPERINFLATION, you name it!

But it was not just the Germans who disliked the treaty. There were plenty of critics in Britain as well.

Even the Big Three who drew up the treaty were not satisfied with it:

- Clemenceau's problem was that it was not harsh enough to satisfy many French people, and in 1920 he was voted out in a general election.
- Lloyd George received a hero's welcome when he returned to Britain. However, at a later date he described the treaty as 'a great pity' and indicated that he believed another war would happen because of it.
- Wilson was very disappointed with the treaty. He said that if he were a German he would not have signed it. In a letter to his wife he said, 'Well, it is finished, and, as no one is satisfied, it makes me hope that we have made a just peace; but it is all in the lap of the gods'. The American CONGRESS later refused to approve the treaty.

So ... could the treaty be justified?

It's a very difficult question and one of the difficulties is to distinguish between criticisms from the time and criticisms made with hindsight. History has shown how the treaty helped to create a cruel regime in Germany (the Nazis) and eventually a second world war. This will always affect modern attitudes to the treaty. It has certainly affected historians' judgements. They have tended to side with critics of the treaty. At the time, however, the majority of people outside of Germany thought that it was fair. Some indeed thought that it was not harsh enough. A more generous treaty would have been totally unacceptable to public opinion in Britain or France. Today historians are more likely to point out how hard a task it was to agree the peace settlement. They suggest that the treaty was the best that could be hoped for in the circumstances. Study Sources 14–18 and see what you think.

SOURCE 14

British historian W. Carr, *A History of Germany*, 1972.

Severe as the Treaty seemed to many Germans, it should be remembered that Germany might easily have fared much worse. If Clemenceau had had his way ... the Rhineland would have become an independent state, the Saar would have been annexed [joined] to France and Danzig would have become a part of Poland ...

FOCUS TASK**Why did Germans react so angrily to the Treaty of Versailles?**

Imagine you are in an exam and you have to answer this question. You only have time to explain two of the points below to answer the question of why Germany reacted so angrily to the treaty. Decide which two you would choose and then hold a class vote to see if the rest of your group agrees with you.

- 1 Germans were not aware of the situation in 1919
- 2 War guilt and reparations
- 3 Disarmament
- 4 German territories
- 5 Fourteen Points and the League of Nations
- 6 Double standards.

SOURCE 15

Extract from *Peacemakers* by Professor Margaret Macmillan of the University of Toronto, published in 2001.

The peacemakers of 1919 made mistakes, of course. By their offhand treatment of the non-European world they stirred up resentments for which the West is still paying today. They took pains over the borders in Europe, even if they did not draw them to everyone's satisfaction, but in Africa they carried on the old practice of handing out territory to suit the imperialist powers. In the Middle East they threw together peoples, in Iraq most notably, who still have not managed to cohere into a civil society. If they could have done better, they certainly could have done much worse. They tried, even cynical old Clemenceau, to build a better order. They could not foresee the future and they certainly could not control it. That was up to their successors. When war came in 1939, it was a result of twenty years of decisions taken or not taken, not of arrangements made in 1919.

SOURCE 16

Winston Churchill, speaking in 1919. He had been a member of the government and a serving officer during the war.

... a fair judgment upon the settlement, a simple explanation of how it arose, cannot leave the authors of the new map of Europe under serious reproach. To an overwhelming extent the wishes of the various populations prevailed.

SOURCE 17

An extract from the diary of Edward House, one of Wilson's top officials, 29 June 1919.

Looking at the conference in retrospect there is much to approve and much to regret. It is easy to say what should have been done, but more difficult to have found a way for doing it.

To those who are saying that the Treaty is bad and should never have been made and that it will involve Europe in infinite difficulties in its enforcement, I feel like admitting it. But I would also say in reply that empires cannot be shattered and new states raised upon their ruins without disturbance. To create new boundaries is always to create new troubles. The one follows the other. While I should have preferred a different peace, I doubt whether it could have been made, for the ingredients for such a peace as I would have had were lacking at Paris.

THINK

- 1 Who is the 'Tiger' referred to in Source 18?
- 2 Explain the message of the cartoon.

PRACTICE QUESTIONS

Study Sources 17 and 18.

- 1 How useful are the two sources for studying reactions to the Treaty of Versailles?
Explain your answer using both sources and your contextual knowledge.

- 2 'The main cause of German dissatisfaction with the peace settlement was reparations payments.'

How far do you agree with this statement?

Explain your answer.

SOURCE 18

A cartoon by the artist Will Dyson, first published in the *Daily Herald*, 13 May 1919. The '1940 class' represents the children born in the 1920s who might die in a future war resulting from the treaty.

PEACE AND FUTURE CANNON FODDER

The Tiger: "Curious! I seem to hear a child weeping!"

TOPIC SUMMARY**Peacemaking**

- Wilson intended the peace settlement to be based on his Fourteen Points.
- Clemenceau wanted a much tougher treaty comprising punishment and guarantees that Germany would not invade France again.
- Lloyd George had to reflect British public opinion, wanting revenge, whereas he knew that Germany needed to recover to continue to be one of Britain's main trading partners.
- The Versailles Settlement was a *Diktat* – the German representatives had to sign.
- Germany lost territory and had restrictions placed on her armed forces.
- Germany was forced to accept war guilt and as a result had to pay reparations.
- Germans hated the terms of the treaty. The Allies were not united in their praise either.
- The settlement left bitterness which festered throughout the 1930s.