

The Paris Peace Conference & The Treaty of Versailles

As Josh Brooman notes:

“When nations fight wars, they usually expect to win. More important, they expect to get something in return for winning — perhaps land or money or more power. The harder they fight the more they suffer, so the more they expect to get.”

[Brooman, *The World Re-made: The Results of the First World War*, p. 2]

Indeed, the Great War had been the most devastating war in the history of mankind and the victorious powers had suffered greatly. Those who had suffered the most (in particular France) felt that Germany should now be made to pay heavily for the damage she had inflicted.

France had 1.4 million soldiers killed in action and another 2.5 million wounded. An area of France larger than Wales was totally ruined by the fighting (most of which took place on French soil). Over two million people had to flee from their homes and three-quarters of a million homes were destroyed. 23,000 French factories were also destroyed. Also,

5,600 kilometres of French railway lines and 48,000 kilometres of roads were totally wrecked. The French now expected the defeated Central Powers, particularly Germany, to pay for the damage.

Most of Belgium was occupied by the Germans for four years. As well as suffering extensive economic damage, over 50,000 Belgian soldiers were killed in action.

Britain had 750,000 soldiers killed and 1.5 million wounded. The war had cost the British government nine billion pounds. Over one billion pounds of this had been borrowed, mostly from America.

Italy joined the Allies in 1915 because the British and French promised them Austrian land once the fighting was over. The cost was tremendous. Three years of bitter fighting on Italian soil had left 600,000 soldiers dead and north-east Italy devastated.

Russia lost 1.7 million soldiers in the war on the Eastern Front. Many thousands of civilians died through starvation. Following the communist revolution of 1917, Russia surrendered to Germany. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which the Russians were forced to sign, took away all Russia's western provinces. One-third of all Russians found themselves under German rule.

The United States of America suffered least of all nations (they did not enter the war until 1917). They had 116,000 men killed in action.

All-in-all, the Allies (including the British Commonwealth) had lost roughly 6 million men. It is little wonder, therefore, that the victorious Allies decided to make Germany pay.

The Central Powers, of course, also suffered greatly. Nearly two million German soldiers lost their lives and the country was exhausted due to the Allied blockade of German ports. The Germans were forced to surrender in order to prevent revolution amongst its people. Germany's allies also suffered greatly. Austria-Hungary lost 1.2 million men; Turkey lost 325,000 men; and Bulgaria lost over 100,000.

To make matters worse, the war-weary and hungry people of Europe were hit by an epidemic of Spanish influenza in mid 1918. It took the lives of more than 25 million people world-wide.

As we have seen, the First World War caused great suffering. The leaders of the victorious nations were determined that such a terrible war must never be allowed to happen again. It was with such a view in mind that the world's leaders met in Paris, in January 1919, to discuss how a lasting peace could be made.

2.1 The Paris Peace Conference (January 1919)

In January 1919, hundreds of politicians from thirty-two different countries met in Paris to try to formulate the basis of a lasting peace.

But, the defeated Central Powers were not represented and neither was communist Russia.

Three politicians soon began to dominate the proceedings. The 'Big Three', as they were known, were:

1. Georges Clemenceau (nick-named 'The Tiger'), the Prime Minister of France
2. Woodrow Wilson, the President of the United States
3. David Lloyd George, the Prime Minister of Britain

The 'Big Three', however, had very different ideas of what should be done. Let's examine them in detail:

Georges Clemenceau had twofold aims:

1. Germany must pay for the damage done to France in the war. The cost had been a massive 2×10^{11} gold francs.
 2. Germany must be made so weak economically and militarily that she could never contemplate attacking France again. This would mean the confiscation of much of Germany's land, her industry and the enforced reduction of German armed forces.
- As we can see, Clemenceau favoured a very harsh treatment of Germany indeed.

Woodrow Wilson had very different ideas to Clemenceau. Instead of crushing Germany, Wilson felt that a fair peace was the best method of preventing further war. In other words, Wilson wanted a peace constructed around his

14 Points (see 5, Woodrow Wilson's 14 points). As we know, Wilson believed that a lasting peace was best built around the twin foundations of:

1. National self-determination
2. The formation of an international peace-keeping organisation, e. g. a League of Nations (see 13, The League of Nations)

Also, Wilson firmly believed that Germany should not be forced to pay the cost of war damage (as he believed that

Germany was not the only nation to blame).

Wilson also believed that a Germany weakened economically would not be beneficial to world trade (especially in terms of purchasing American goods).

David Lloyd George agreed with many of Wilson's 14 Points. He agreed with Wilson that if defeated nations were treated too harshly then they were likely to become angry and resentful. This could cause future problems and may actually provoke aggression and potential future war. He also felt that an economically strong Germany was good for European trade (particularly with Britain).

The British public, however, wanted Lloyd George to be harsh on Germany. Popular slogans such as 'Hand the Kaiser' and 'Make Germany Pay' appeared on posters. Newspaper owners and ambitious politicians also encouraged anti-German feelings in Britain.

During the peace negotiations Lloyd George received a telegram from 370 British MPs demanding that Germany should be forced to pay full compensation.

One British politician stated:

"The Germans are going to pay every penny; they are going to be squeezed, as a lemon is squeezed, until the pips squeak."

Faced with this sort of opinion in Britain, it was going to be very difficult indeed for Lloyd George to act according to his own beliefs.

Orlando the Prime Minister of Italy, was more concerned about securing the promises of territory laid out in the secret Treaty of London.

By June 1919 the work of the politicians at the Paris Peace Conference was complete. They had devised a number of peace treaties to be imposed on the defeated Central Powers.

They were:

- The Treaty of Versailles (with Germany) (on this page, The Treaty of Versailles)
- The Treaty of Saint Germain (with Austria) (on page 11, The Treaty of Saint Germain)
- the Treaty of Trianon (with Hungary) (on page 11, The Treaty of Trianon)
- the Treaty of Sèvres (with Turkey) (on page 11, The Treaty of Sèvres)
- The Treaty of Neuilly (with Bulgaria) (on page 12, The Treaty of Neuilly)

We must now examine each of these treaties in detail:

2.2 The Treaty of Versailles (with Germany, June 1919)

On 28th June 1919, in the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles (16 kilometres from Paris), the Allied leaders forced the Germans to sign the **Treaty of Versailles**.

The Treaty of Versailles was over 200 pages long and contained more than 400 separate clauses. Here is a summary of the major conditions of the treaty:

1. A League of Nations was set up (see page 13, The League of Nations). The first 26 clauses of the Treaty of Versailles described how the League would operate. These rules were called the 'Covenant of the League of Nations'.
2. Germany had to lose territory in Europe. The following list denotes the major losses (see page 13 for a complete table):
 - (a) Alsace and Lorraine (which the Germans had taken from France in 1871 following the Franco-Prussian war) was returned to France.
 - (b) Eupen, Moresnet and Malmedy were given to Belgium.
 - (c) North Schleswig was given to Denmark (following a plebiscite).

- (d) West Prussia and Posen were given to Poland. This gave Poland access to the Baltic Sea (the 'Polish corridor') and had the ridiculous effect of cutting off East Prussia from the rest of Germany. The German Baltic port of Danzig (the main port in West Prussia) did not go to Poland, however, but was to be a free city under the administration of the League of Nations (because its population was wholly German).
 - (e) Memel was given to Lithuania.
 - (f) The heavily industrialised Saar region was placed under the administration of the League of Nations for a period of 15 years (after which a plebiscite would be held to decide whether it should belong to France or Germany). In the meantime, France was to control its coal mines (see page 22, The Saar Commission).
 - (g) Upper Silesia, with its heavy industry, was given to Poland.
 - (h) Hultschin was given to the newly formed Czechoslovakia.
3. All the land Germany had taken from Russia, under the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, in 1918, was taken away. Some was returned to Russia, and some was used to create the new nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Some of it was given to reconstituted Poland.
 4. The Rhineland, in the western part of Germany, was made into a demilitarised zone (DMZ). This meant that no German soldiers or weapons were allowed there. The DMZ included all land west of the River Rhine plus an area 50 kilometres deep to the east. Also, the Allies were to keep an army of occupation on the west bank of the Rhine for a period of 15 years.
 5. All of Germany's overseas colonies were taken away and became 'mandates'¹ under Allied control. In Africa, Britain took control of German East Africa (which became Tanganyika/Tanzania); France took control over most of Togoland and most of the Cameroons; South Africa took over German South West Africa. In the southern hemisphere, New Zealand took control of Western Samoa.
 6. Germany's armed forces were reduced to the bare minimum. The German army was limited to 100,000 men. The navy was limited to six battleships and was not allowed any submarines at all. No air force was allowed either.
 7. Anschluss with Austria was forbidden. Germany was not allowed to unite with Austria into a single German-speaking nation,
 8. Germany was forced to accept complete blame for starting the Great War. This acceptance of guilt was embodied in Clause 231 (the famous War Guilt Clause).
 9. Germany had to pay reparations. Because Germany was considered to be guilty of starting the war, she was forced to pay for the repairing of the war damage (mainly to France). The exact amount would be decided later by a special committee (it was fixed at £6,600 million in 1921).

It is clear from the above conditions that the Treaty of Versailles was a very harsh treaty indeed. It was much more harsh than Germany expected it to be (because they felt it would be much more in line to Woodrow Wilson's 14

Points which made no mention of a War Guilt clause or the payment of reparations).

There are several reasons why the Treaty of Versailles was a harder peace than the 14 Points suggested it might have been. They are:

- Woodrow Wilson's attitude towards the Germans had hardened because of Germany's own harsh treatment of Russia in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (which was made after the publication of the 14 Points). He was, therefore, more willing to give way to Clemenceau's desires for harsh terms against Germany than he was previously. Wilson was also angered by the German destruction of mines, factories and public buildings as they retreated across Belgium and France in 1918.
- With the Paris Peace Conference taking place on French soil, the French Prime Minister Clemenceau had more sway than he would have had if it had been held elsewhere. He was able, therefore, to influence the delegates towards his point of view (which was the formulation of a very harsh treaty in which the Germans would be severely weakened financially and militarily).
- Lloyd George, who favoured Wilson's call for a fair peace, was pushed towards the Clemenceau line by hostile public opinion in Britain towards the Germans.

¹An LDC under the control of a MEDC to prepare it for independence.

When the Germans were told of the harsh conditions of the treaty, just a few weeks before they were due to sign it, there was uproar in Germany.

Most Germans felt that the treaty was a 'Diktat' (a dictated peace) because Germany was not even represented at the Paris Peace Conference where the treaty was devised).

The government resigned and German naval captains sank their ships in protest in Scapa Flow (where they were being held by the British).

However, the German representatives had no choice but to sign the treaty. The Allies threatened to invade if they refused!

Germany had lost much of her territory, 10% of her population (6 million people), and had been forced both to admit total guilt for starting the war and to make crippling reparations payments.

No wonder the Germans

were outraged. As

Norman Lowe states:

"The Treaty of Versailles in particular was one of the most controversial settlements ever signed and was criticised even in the Allied countries on the grounds that it was too harsh on the Germans who were bound to object so violently that another war was inevitable, sooner or later."

[Lowe, *Mastering Modern World History*, 2nd edition, p. 38]

The English economist John Maynard

Keynes argued that:

"The policy of reducing Germany to servitude for a generation, of degrading the lives of millions of human beings, and of depriving a whole nation of happiness should be abhorrent and detestable ... Some preach it in the name of justice. In the great events of man's history ... justice is not so simple."

However, the majority of people in the Allied countries felt that it was justice for the Germans to suffer.

2.2.1 Did the Treaty of Versailles make another war inevitable?

Strictly speaking, nothing in history is inevitable. However, the harshness of the treaty did cause the kind of resentment and hatred in Germany that made another war more likely. As we shall see, Hitler and the Nazi party made it absolutely clear throughout the 1920s that they would smash the hated 'Diktat' of Versailles if they ever gained power. From

1933, when they did win power, they began bit-by-bit to break the conditions and restrictions of the treaty imposed at Versailles.

Moreover, although the treaty was harsh, it did not have the results that the French desired. Although it weakened Germany, it did not weaken her enough to prevent another war. Germany still had the potential to be the strongest economic power in Europe.

As Norman

Lowe points

out:

"The Germans did have some grounds for complaint, but it is worth pointing out that the treaty could have been even more harsh: if Clemenceau had had his way, the Rhineland would have become an independent state, and France would have annexed the Saar. However, Germany was still the strongest power in Europe economically, so that the unwise thing about Versailles was that it annoyed the Germans yet did not render them too weak to retaliate."

[Lowe, Mastering Modern World History, 2nd edition, p. 38]

The moral of the story is, of course, if you are going to annoy an enemy by weakening him then you must make certain that you weaken him sufficiently so that he cannot strike back at you.

Alternatively, you must make an honourable peace with your enemy so that he will not be annoyed and will not want to retaliate.

The Treaty of Versailles failed on both these counts.

Its harshness left the Germans seething with anger and resentment, but was not harsh enough to prevent that anger eventually spilling out in the form of aggressive foreign policy designed to smash the treaty.

This, of course, made another war very likely indeed. The resentment surrounding the treaty helped Adolf Hitler come to power and Hitler was not afraid to take the aggressive action necessary to restore German pride and undo the shackles of Versailles.

And, as we know, it took the Second World War to prevent Hitler achieving his ambitions of a Nazi dominated Europe.