Treaty of Versailles

The Treaty of Versailles was one of the peace treaties signed on June 28, 1919, in the Palace of Versailles, by Germany and the Allied Powers at the end of World War One. It was signed exactly five years after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the event that had triggered the war. The signing of the treaty followed six months of negotiations at the Paris Peace Conference, which had opened on January 18, 1919. It also led to the creation of two major international organizations: the League of Nations (1919-1946) and the International Labour Organization.

Negotiators tried with great difficulty to enforce and maintain peace as well as democracy. The talks took place in a complex international context that witnessed a significant shift of power and remapping of Europe. While the communist revolutions had led to the demise of the Russian Empire, the end of the Great War provoked the collapse of German and Austro-Hungarian powers, and the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire.

The main terms of the peace were determined by the so-called ‘Big Three’: the English Prime Minister David Lloyd George, the French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau and the President of the USA Woodrow Wilson. The Allies agreed to hold Germany responsible for all the loss and damage caused by the war in Article 231 of the treaty, later known as the War Guilt Clause. The terms of the peace treaty forced Germany to make territorial concessions. New borders were drawn defining the independent states of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Austria. Germany had to give up its colonial empire and France recovered the parts of Alsace-Lorraine that it had lost at the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. Measures such as the demilitarization of the Rhineland also limited future German military power.

However, the peace treaty was the product of a disorganized and rushed process that was undermined by growing disagreements over the way to enforce peace and control Germany’s power. Given the unprecedented scale and huge economic cost of the conflict, financial reparation was the most controversial issue. Clemenceau demanded full financial and territorial reparation while Lloyd George and Wilson argued for a peace of moderation in order to rebuild European economies and favor long-term peace. For the French, the Versailles Treaty was designed to avenge its humiliating defeat by Germany in 1870. French politicians actively sought to weaken Germany’s power, which they saw as a threat to national security, and insisted on the occupation of the Rhineland by the allies. Disagreements over the reparations fuelled revisionist theories in Germany that questioned the War Guilt Clause. All German political parties rejected the Treaty as a ‘the Diktat’: the punitive terms of the treaty had been imposed on their country, leaving no room for negotiation. In the end, the signing of the treaty did not enshrine firm proposals for the future of Europe. The US Senate rejected the treaty, largely because it enabled the League of Nations, rather than individual governments, to declare war. And while later historians cast doubt on the thesis that the reparations clause led inexorably to Nazism and WWII, there is general agreement that resentment in Germany over the humiliations imposed by the Treaty exacerbated the turmoil of the Great Depression, leading to Adolf Hitler’s rise to power.

Bibliography

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