HOW THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES AND GERMAN GUILT LED TO WORLD WAR 2

AMERICA SAYS "NO" TO THE "LEAGUE OF NATIONS"

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GERMAN BATTLE FLAG OF WW1

GERMAN BATTLE FLAG OF WW2

When Germany signed the armistice ending hostilities in the First World War on November 11, 1918, its leaders believed they were accepting a "peace without victory," as outlined by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson in his famous Fourteen Points. But from the moment the leaders of the victorious Allied nations arrived in France for the peace conference in early 1919, the post-war reality began to diverge sharply from Wilson's romantic vision.

Five long months later, on June 28—exactly five years after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo—the leaders of the Allied and associated powers, as well as representatives from Germany, gathered in the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles to sign the final treaty. By placing the burden of war guilt entirely on Germany, imposing harsh reparations payments, and creating an increasingly unstable collection of smaller nations in Europe, the treaty would ultimately fail to resolve the underlying issues that caused the war to break out in 1914, and help pave the way for another massive global conflict 20 years later.

THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE

Formal peace negotiations opened in Paris on January 18, 1919, the anniversary of the coronation of German Emperor Wilhelm I at the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. World War I had brought up painful memories of that conflict—which ended in German unification and its seizure of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine from France—and now France intended to make Germany pay.

The "Big Four" leaders of the victorious Allied nations (Woodrow Wilson of the United States, David Lloyd George of Great Britain, Georges Clemenceau of France, and, to a lesser extent, Vittorio Orlando of Italy) dominated the peace negotiations. None of the defeated nations were invited to weigh in, and even the smaller Allied powers had little say. Though the Versailles Treaty, signed with Germany in June 1919, was the most famous outcome of the Paris Peace Conference, the Allies also had separate treaties with Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Turkey, and the formal peacemaking process wasn't concluded until the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne in July 1923.

The Versailles Treaty forced Germany to give up territory to Belgium, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, return Alsace and Lorraine to France, and cede all of its overseas colonies in China, the Pacific, and Africa to the Allied nations. In addition, it had to drastically reduce its armed forces and accept the demilitarization and Allied occupation of the region around the Rhine River.

Most importantly, Article 231 of the treaty placed all blame for inciting the war squarely on Germany and forced it to pay some $63 billion in reparations, later reduced to $33 billion (around $490 billion in 2018 dollars) to the Allied nations.

Government Officials Drafting the Terms of the Treaty of Versailles

Faced with the seemingly impossible task of balancing many competing priorities, the treaty ended up as a lengthy and confusing document that satisfied no one. "It literally is an attempt to remake Europe," says Michael Neiberg, professor of history at U.S. Army War College and author of The Treaty of Versailles: A Concise History (2017). "I'm not one of those people who believe the treaty made the Second World War inevitable, but I think you could argue that it made Europe a less stable place."

In Wilson's vision of the post-war world, all nations (not just the losers) would reduce their armed forces, preserve the freedom of the seas, and join an international peacekeeping organization called the League of Nations. But his fellow Allied leaders rejected much of his plan as naive and too idealistic. The French, in particular, wanted Germany to pay a heavy price for the war, including loss of territory, disarmament, and payment of reparations. At the same time, the British saw Wilson's plan as a threat to their supremacy in Europe.

ASIDE FROM AFFECTING GERMANY, THE TREATY OF VERSAILLE MAY HAVE CAUSED THE GREAT DEPRESSION.

Many people, even at the time, agreed with the British economist John Maynard Keynes that Germany could not possibly pay so much in reparations without severe risks to the entire European economy. In his later memoir, U.S. President Herbert Hoover went so far as to blame reparations for causing the Great Depression.

But though most Germans were furious about the Treaty of Versailles, calling it a Diktat (dictated peace) and condemning the German representatives who signed it as "November criminals" who had stabbed them in the back, in hindsight, it seems clear that the treaty turned out to be far more lenient than its authors might have intended. "Germany ended up not paying anywhere near what the treaty said Germany should pay," Neiberg says, adding that hardly anyone had expected Germany to be able to pay the entire amount.

And despite the loss of German territory, "there were plenty of people who understood as early as 1919 that the map actually gave Germany some advantages," Neiberg points out. "It put small states on Germany's borders, in eastern and central Europe. It eliminated Russia as a direct enemy of Germany, at least in the 1920s, and it removed Russia as an ally of France. So while the treaty looked really harsh to some people, it actually opened up opportunities for others."

The war guilt clause was more problematic. "You have to go back to 1914 when most Germans believed they had entered the war because Russia had mobilized its army," explains Neiberg. "To most Germans in 1919, and not just those on the right, blaming Germany specifically for the war made no sense. Especially when they did not put a war guilt clause on Austria-Hungary, which you could reasonably argue were the people that actually started this."

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The first informal meeting of the League of Nations in Geneva.

NEW EUROPEAN BORDERS, THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS, AND GERMAN REPARATIONS

Taken as a whole, the treaties concluded after World War I redrew the borders of Europe, carving up the former Austro-Hungarian Empire into states like Yugoslavia, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. As Neiberg puts it: "Whereas in 1914, you had a small number of great powers, after 1919, you have a larger number of smaller powers. That meant that the balance of power was less stable."

The Versailles Treaty also included a covenant for the League of Nations, the international organization that Woodrow Wilson had envisioned would preserve peace among the nations of Europe and the world. However, the U.S. Senate ultimately refused to ratify the Versailles Treaty due to its opposition to the League, which left the organization seriously weakened without U.S. participation or military backing.

Meanwhile, Germany's economic woes, exacerbated by the burden of reparations and general European inflation, destabilized the Weimar Republic, the government established at the end of the war.

Due to lasting resentment of the Versailles Treaty, the National Socialist (Nazi) Party and other radical right-wing parties were able to gain support in the 1920s and early '30s by promising to overturn its harsh provisions and make Germany into a significant European power once again.

TREATY SIGNED; WAR OVER

The Evening World. FINAL

WILSON LEAVES PARIS; SAILS SUNDAY

GERMANS PLEDGED TO ACT IN GOOD FAITH

CITY'S BELLS RING TIDINGS AS PEACE TREATY IS SIGNED; FLEET JOINS IN CELEBRATION

TREATY SEVERE ON GERMANY, SAYS WILSON, BUT IMPOSES NOTHING SHE CANNOT DO

GUNS BOOM, PLANES FILL AIR; FRENCH CROWDS CHEER PEACE

GERMANS PLEDGED TO SIGN DELIVERED TREATY; NO RESERVATION

WILSON STARTING FOR HOME, BIDS FRANCE GOODSPEED

VERSAILLES TREATY MADE WW 2 POSSIBLE NOT INEVITABLE

In 1945, when the leaders of the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union met at Potsdam, they blamed the failures of the Versailles Treaty for making another great conflict necessary. They vowed to right the wrongs of their peacekeeping predecessors. But Neiberg, like many historians, takes a more nuanced view, pointing to events other than the treaty—including the United States not joining the League of Nations and the rise of the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union—as necessary elements in understanding the path to the Second World War.

"In my personal view as a historian, you need to be really careful directly connecting events that happened 20 years apart," he says. "A different treaty produces a different outcome, yes. But it would help if you didn't draw inevitability. It's part of the recipe, but it's not the only ingredient."

AMERICA BOWS OUT

The Americans were no longer involved at all—not because they were excluded, but because they had decided that they had paid their debt to Lafayette with more than 320,000 American military casualties, more than 116,000 of them dead. Their duty was done. In the Senate, the Republican majority had long warned Wilson that it would not accept a League of Nations that interfered with an independent American foreign policy; a treaty that obliged America to belong to such a league would be fatally flawed. This was not Wilson's attitude, of course. He thought the Treaty of Versailles a victory—he told his wife that "as no one is satisfied, it makes me hope we have a just peace"—and he fought for it with such vigor that he brooked no compromises with and would accept no amendments or revisions from, the United States Senate. On 10 July 1919, he challenged the Senate to approve the treaty, saying, "Dare we reject it and break the heart of the world?

It looked as though the Senate, to Wilson's astonishment and rage, was prepared to do just that. So, he embarked on a whistle-stop campaign to rally the American people to the treaty. His health was failing, and the campaign nearly killed him. His doctors finally forced him to stop. But in his righteous way, he was prepared to risk his life for what he and Lloyd George and Clemenceau had wrought in Paris. Wilson suffered a terrible stroke on 2 October, which left him physically and mentally debilitated, though Wilson's wife tried to keep the effects hidden.

Republicans in the Senate would not ratify a treaty that committed the United States, without the consent of Congress, to protect the territorial integrity of threatened League states. Wilson, who by November had regained some of his strength, again refused any alteration of the treaty. He won the Nobel Peace Prize but failed to get what he really wanted. In November 1919, the Versailles Treaty was put up for a vote in the Senate, once with amendments, once without—and both times, it failed to gain the necessary two-thirds majority. On 19 March 1920, another vote was held on an amended version of the treaty, but Wilsonian Democrats who refused to countenance any changes helped sink it. In 1921, after Wilson was out of office, the United States reached a separate peace with each of the chief Central Powers—Germany, Austria, and Hungary - but disdained to join The League of Nations.

Wilson had the United States enter the Great War as an "associated power" rather than an "ally." Perhaps it should have been no surprise that despite his best efforts, the United States wrapped up its postwar business in a similar fashion on its terms. Wilson was asked in his last cabinet meeting what he would do now. Pedagogical to the previous, he announced, "I am going to try to teach ex-presidents how to behave."