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Essay: World War I and the Versailles Treaty

The Pillage of Germany

Sigmund Freud, an Austrian neurologist who became known as the founding father of psychoanalysis, wrote an essay entitled *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death* advising that the fury of the First World War would " shatter the bonds of a common European civilization and engulf Europeans in hatred for years to come." Articles 231 - 248 of the Treaty of Versailles (later deemed the "war guilt" clause) obliged Germany cease military industrialism by disarming, make considerable territorial concessions, and pay heavy reparations to certain countries. The Treaty of Versailles ultimately caught Germany between two acceptable extremes of repayment due to an emotional and steadfast difference of opinion illustrated by France and the United States; that is to say a successful treaty would have either pardoned Germany or utterly incapacitated them (such that World War II would have been impossible).

In his *French Demands for Security and Revenge*, Georges Clemenceau voiced France's needs for safety and vengeance upon Germany, of whom Clemenceau held a personal profound hatred and distrust. Clemenceau cited the German claim: "Deutshland über alles," meaning "Germany above everything"; to which Clemenceau urged the utter destruction of the German state else France face an impending conquest by the "old but childish race" (Perry 299). Clemenceau articulates France's emotional involvement and (albeit not necessarily unwarranted) knee-jerk hatred towards Germany, who is also demonstrably emotionally invested in European affairs. When German soldiers are forced to either return to Britain or dismantle the German fleet, the soldiers embody the childishness described by Clemenceau by sinking the ships on the English border.

An admittedly more geographically and geopolitically removed Woodrow Wilson, the then-President of the United States, fundamentally disagreed with Clemenceau. Wilson promised a new world with a League of Nations that Clemenceau deemed "a mere noble sentiment divorced with reality" (Perry 299). This dissonance between the two leaders forced an ultimately unsuccessful agreement that did not meet the needs of any of the states involved. Again Freud reflects on this conclusion to The Great War in *A Legacy of Embitterment*, in which he asserts that "no event has ever destroyed so much that is precious in the common possessions of humanity, confused so many of the clearest intelligences, or so thoroughly debased what is highest." The United States' unyielding commitment to idealism does not compromise effectively with France's persistent hunger for revenge. As a result, the German economy is crippled by the treaty's implication halting industrialization[[1]](#footnote-1); any life in the economy (and also in the spirit of the people) is slowly choked out with the demand that Germany pay the equivalent of sixty billion current dollars just after having been robbed of any fantasy of a functioning economy.

The Treaty of Versailles was not one based on logic, reason, and contributions from all nations involved. While such a theoretical treaty might have effected a more stable world balance, the historical treaty was contrived from the emotional disagreements of a select few powers and was proved to be eventually unsuccessful just twenty-one years later.

1. From the preamble of Part V of the treaty: "In order to render possible the initiation of a general limitation of the armaments of all nations, Germany undertakes strictly to observe the military, naval and air clauses which follow." [↑](#footnote-ref-1)