



Background

The Treaty of Versailles

The terms of the Treaty of Versailles were announced in June 1919. The German politicians were not consulted about the terms of the Treaty. They were shown the draft terms in May 1919. They complained bitterly, but the Allies did not take any notice of their complaints. Germany had very little choice but to sign the Treaty.

The main terms were:

1. War guilt

- Germany had to accept the guilt for starting the war.

2. Germany's armed forces

- The German army was limited to 100,000 men.
- Conscription (forced army service) was banned; soldiers had to be volunteers.
- Germany was not allowed armoured vehicles, submarines or aircraft.
- The navy could build only six battleships.
- The Rhineland became a demilitarised zone. This meant that no German troops were allowed into that area.

3. Reparations

- Germany had to pay for the damage caused by the war. The exact figure was not agreed until 1921 when it was set at £6,600 million, an enormous amount.

4. German territories and colonies

- Alsace-Lorraine went to France
- Eupen, Moresnet and Malmedy went to Belgium
- North Schleswig went to Denmark (after a vote by the population)
- West Prussia and Posen went to Poland
- Danzig became a free city controlled by the League of Nations (giving Poland a seaport)
- Memel went to Lithuania
- Saar was controlled by the League of Nations (with a vote by the population to be held on the matter after 15 years)
- German colonies became mandates under the control of the League of Nations (in practice this usually meant Britain and France)
- Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania became independent states (Germany had taken these states from Russia in 1918)

5. League of Nations

- The League of Nations was set up as an international 'police force'. The League was



based on a Covenant (or agreement). The Covenant and the constitution of the League of Nations were part of the terms of the Treaty. Germany was not invited to join the League until it had shown that it could be a peace-loving country.

How did Britain react to the Treaty?

When the Treaty terms were announced in June 1919, there was a mixed reaction. The general opinion in Britain was that the terms were fair and should probably have been more severe. British newspapers suggested that Germany would no longer threaten world peace. Any complaints by the Germans were dismissed as trickery and play-acting. When Prime Minister David Lloyd George returned from Paris in June 1919, he received a hero's welcome. The king came out to meet him at the railway station, which was completely unheard of in British history.

How did France react to the Treaty?

Reactions in France were mixed. There were celebrations that the war was definitely over. People approved of the reparations that Germany had to pay. They also liked the fact that Germany's borders with France (the Rhineland) would be demilitarised. This meant Germany could not station any troops in this area. They appreciated that the coalmines of the Saar would bring prosperity to France instead of Germany. They also believed that the League of Nations would be a powerful force for peace. It would protect France if Germany recovered and tried to act aggressively again.

However, there was a strong sense that Germany still threatened France. Many French people looked at the terrible cost of the war and believed that France had suffered far more than Germany. Soon after the Treaty, Clemenceau stood for election as President of France. He was outraged when other candidates stood against him. It was then that he realised how bitter many people were about the Treaty.

How did the USA react to the Treaty?

In the USA reactions to the Treaty were generally negative. Many Americans felt that the Treaty was unfair on Germany. More importantly, they felt that Britain and France were making themselves rich at Germany's expense and that the USA should not be helping them to do this. This was not really the case, but many Americans believed it.

This was partly because American politics were deeply divided at the time. President Wilson led the Democratic Party. However, his rivals in the Republican Party dominated the US Congress. They used the Treaty as an opportunity to criticise Wilson. Wilson has to take some of the blame for this as he made little effort to consult the Republicans about the Treaty. Americans were also uneasy about Wilson's scheme for a League of Nations. They were concerned that belonging to the League would drag the USA into international disputes that were not their concern. In the end, the Congress rejected the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations.

How did Germany react to the Treaty?

Reactions to the Treaty in Germany were very negative. There were protests in the German Reichstag (Parliament) and out on the streets. It is not hard to see why Germans were out-



aged. Germany lost 10% of its land, all its overseas colonies, 12.5% of its population, 16% of its coal and 48% of its iron industry. There were also the humiliating terms, which made Germany accept blame for the war, limit their armed forces and pay reparations.

What do historians think of the Treaty?

Much criticism has been made of the Treaty because it was too harsh on Germany. On the other hand, historians have pointed out that Germany could have been treated a lot more harshly for several reasons:

- Germany only accepted the Fourteen Points when it was clear they were losing the war.
- In the harsh Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Germans took away 34% of Russia's population and 50% of its industry and made them pay 300 million gold roubles in reparations.
- Clemenceau wanted the Treaty to be much harsher, with Germany broken up into smaller states, but Wilson stopped this happening.
- The reparations payments cost Germany only 2% of its annual production.
- Germany's main economic problem was not reparations but war debt, which it had planned to pay by winning the war and making other countries pay reparations.
- In 1924, Germany received huge loans from the USA to help its economy recover.
- The years 1924-29 were fairly prosperous for Germany. For example, Germany produced twice as much steel as Britain in 1925.

Some historians believe that the peacemakers did the best job they could, given the difficult circumstances they were in. Other historians believe the Treaty was a disastrous half measure. It damaged Germany enough to cause resentment. However, it left Germany strong enough to seek revenge.

Links

The Versailles Treaty

<http://history.acusd.edu/gen/text/versaillestreaty/vercontents.html>

This American academic site contains immense detail about the Treaty and is best used for looking up something very specific.

League of Nations Fight

<http://history.acusd.edu/gen/WW2Timeline/1919League2.html>

This is an interesting outline of the fight to get the US Senate to accept the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations.

Versailles and Peacemaking

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/wwone/versailles_01.shtml

An article from the BBC World War One resource, this outlines the consequences of the Peace Treaty.