

The Treaty of Versailles and Revolution

The Treaty of Versailles ending the First World War represents one of the most significant diplomatic events you will study this year and is essential to your understanding of the 20th century. The Versailles settlement is often compared with the Congress of Vienna in 1814-1815 regarding their respective schemes for collective security and the success of their decisions. Though the Allies negotiated treaties with each of the Central Powers, the settlement with Germany proved most important for future events.

Revolutionary Fallout

When the Allied victors met starting in January 1919 in the Palace of Versailles, they found it nearly impossible to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Revolutionary violence led to the toppling of four empires – Austro-Hungarian, German, Ottoman, and Russian. What would replace these traditional diplomatic entities remained an open question. Allied leaders were prepared to confirm the **creation of new states** out of the former Habsburg Empire (Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, and the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) and promote democratic governments there and in Germany. Even after the completion of treaties, revolutionary unrest continued, often fed by the existence of a new socialist government in the east, the Soviet Union.

Differing Goals for and Visions of the Peace

President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1923), the first American president to travel abroad, set foot on European soil a hero. He authored the renowned Fourteen Points, his idealistic vision for reconstructing Europe and “making the world safe for democracy.” He also declared that WWI should be the “war to end all wars.” Wilson dreamed of a new diplomatic order guided by open diplomacy, freedom of the seas, arms reduction, **national self-determination**, and collective security. Representatives from African and Asian colonies attended negotiations in hopes of gaining autonomy only to be thwarted as former German and Ottoman colonies were granted to Britain and France under **mandates**, granting them Control until the colonies were ready for self-governance. Collective security was to be achieved by the creation of an international governing body to mediate disputes – the League of Nations. Wilson knew that Germany must be punished but hoped that

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drastic action might be avoided to build a more secure foundation for democratic government after the war.

French Premier George Clemenceau (1841-1929), nicknamed the Tiger, considered Wilson's vision utopian, and concentrated on security for France by emasculating Germany's military and economic potential. **British Prime Minister David Lloyd George** stood somewhere in between Wilson and Clemenceau (famously remarking, "I had God on one side and the devil on the other") in wanting to punish Germany but not utterly destroy it. And though, **Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando** (1860-1952) represented Italy in negotiations, he eventually walked out in protest over Italy's lack of territorial spoils. Importantly, Russia sat out the negotiations, as the new Bolshevik leader Lenin denounced the gathering as a capitalist plot. The Allies rejected German participation and continued the naval blockade until June 1919 when Germany signed the treaty; in all, approximately 750,000 Germans died of starvation during and after World War I. Given these circumstances, it is not surprising that the treaty pleased no nation.

The Final Product

After months of negotiations, the reluctant German delegates signed the Versailles settlement in the palace's famous Hall of Mirrors on June 28, 1919 (5 years to the day from the start of the war). By all accounts, the treaty represented a harsh peace:

• SKILL SET

The Treaty of Versailles's Article 231, which assessed full responsibility for the war to Germany, represents the first official interpretation of the war's origins (INTR) and of great political consequence, since it was used to justify the victors' actions against the defeated. To sharpen your skill of Comparison (COMP), make a balance sheet or Venn Diagram of the Congress of Vienna and the Treaty of Versailles. Which was more successful in addressing its respective situation and promoting collective security: **Territorial Losses** – Germany lost 13% of its territory and 12% of its population. The important Saar industrial region was placed under League of Nations control until 1935. East Prussia was cut off from the rest of Germany to provide the new Polish state with access to the Sea. Finally, Germany surrendered its overseas colonies.

Demilitarization – The German army was reduced to 100,000 men, the nation's naval fleet was severely curtailed (including the banning of U-boats), and its air force was eliminated. Fearing further German aggression, the French insisted on the demilitarization of the Rhineland, adjacent to France.

War Guilt – In the most controversial provision of the treaty, Germany was forced to accept full responsibility for the war via Article 231

Reparations – Based on the War Guilt clause, the Allies in 1921 set a reparations amount for the German government of 132 billion marks (some \$33 billion), a figure most German observers considered exorbitant.

League of Nations – To promote collective security, the Allies agreed to Wilson’s idea of a League of Nations. However, because the U.S. Senate refused to ratify the treaty, the United States never joined, and the new Soviet Union and Germany were initially excluded.

Consequences and Conflicts

Few were fully satisfied with the Treaty of Versailles, but none less so than Germany. Germany’s new postwar government, the Weimar Republic, started off with two strikes against it, being saddled with what most Germans perceived as a dictated peace. Discontent over the treaty was fed by extremists groups like the Nazis and played a major role in bringing down Germany’s short-lived experiment with democracy. Almost immediately, observers condemned the economic arrangements of the treaty. Economist John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946) attended the negotiations on behalf of Britain and afterward predicted in his *Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919) the ruination of the world economy, which was not long in coming. Overall, the inability of the victors to establish a consistent diplomatic approach torpedoed their efforts at establishing a stable balance of power, but perhaps the complexity of the issues and intensity of the conflicts might have doomed any settlement. Certainly a major reason for the treaty’s failure proved to be the subsequent isolation of both the United States and the Soviet Union. America’s unwillingness to guarantee French security after 1920 and the fear of Soviet communism opened the way for a revival of German power. Without a full commitment to collective security and the League of Nations, Europe in the next two decades drifted toward an even more destructive war.