

# TREATY OF VERSAILLES (1919)

## TREATY AT A GLANCE

### *Completed*

June 28, 1919, at Versailles, France

### *Signatories*

United States, British Empire, France, Italy, and Japan ("Principal Allied and Associated Powers"); Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, China, Cuba, Ecuador, Greece, Guatemala, Haiti, the Hejaz (part of present-day Saudi Arabia), Honduras, Liberia, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serb-Croat-Slovene State, Siam, Czechoslovakia, and Uruguay ("the Allied and Associated Powers"); and Germany

### *Overview*

The Treaty of Versailles ended World War I. The product of acrimonious debate among the Allies and excluding Germany and the other Central Powers, it was harshly punitive. A defeated Germany was further humiliated and compelled to admit war guilt, to give up territory, to disarm, to agree to Allied occupation of the Saar and Rhineland, and to pay heavy reparations. Failing to address any number of serious diplomatic issues raised by the war and undercut by the gap between the high tones of its idealistic justification and the low-down realism of its draconian measures, the treaty helped establish the poisoned postwar atmosphere that led to the rise of Nazi Germany and World War II.

## Historical Background

The guns of the "Great War" fell silent with the armistice of November 11, 1918. On November 17, under the terms of the armistice, Allied troops began to reoccupy those portions of France and Belgium that had been held by the Germans since their first big push during the opening weeks of the war, in 1914. Allied and U.S. troops followed the withdrawing Germans into Germany itself, and on December 9 the Allied armies crossed the Rhine, taking up positions at the bridgeheads agreed to in the armistice.

On January 18, 1919, a peace conference was convened at Paris. That it was bitter and tumultuous is, perhaps, no surprise. Yet the acrimony developed not against representatives of Germany and the other Central Powers, who were excluded from the conference, but between the 27 Allied nations, who disagreed on the terms of the peace. From the beginning it was understood that the four major Allied powers, Britain, France, Italy, and the United States (the last technically an "associated power"), would dominate the Paris Peace Conference. But in its politically charged

atmosphere, delegations from the other nations harassed the Great Powers with their various—most often conflicting—complaints and demands. In addition, the Great Powers themselves sent five delegates each, and these were supported by sprawling staffs that included a bewildering myriad of geographers, historians, and economists, as well as lawyers, politicians, and junior diplomats. This global assembly of folks from professions that, whatever else they instilled in their members, provided them with the gift of gab and a love of argumentation that was clearly unwieldy, a congregation in which peace could not be made.

The five major victors—the four great Western powers plus Japan—consequently created a Council of Ten, consisting of the heads of government and their foreign ministers, but this also proved too many. Since Italy and Japan in any case tended to narrow their focus to matters of mostly local interest, the major decisions in Paris were hammered out in private by an informal group the press took to calling the Big Three: Woodrow Wilson, president of the United States;

David Lloyd George, prime minister of Great Britain; and Georges Clemenceau, premier of France.

The French tried at the outset to impose an agenda for the conference, but Wilson brushed this schedule of priorities aside and insisted on tackling his proposed League of Nations first, so as to prevent the others from rejecting the League later because they were tired and drained and wanted to go home or from using it as a bargaining chip in later disputes throughout the talks. (Although included as Part I of the Versailles document, the COVENANT OF THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS is so important in the history of the 20th century that it warrants treatment in a separate entry.)

In general, Wilson advocated a conciliatory settlement based on his Fourteen Points, which he had enumerated before a joint session of Congress on January 8, 1918, as the basis for a just peace. These were 1) "open covenants, openly arrived at"; 2) freedom of the seas; 3) removing economic barriers to international trade; 4) radical reduction of armament to the lowest point consistent with domestic security; 5) a modification of all colonial claims on the basis of the self-determination of peoples, that is, making sure colonial arrangements respected the will of the peoples involved; 6) national self-determination for the peoples of Russia (assuming, of course, as Wilson did, that the Bolsheviks were usurping thugs); 7) restoration of Belgium; 8) return of all the German invaded and occupied territory of France, plus Alsace-Lorraine, which France had lost to Germany back in the Franco-Prussian War; 9) Italian recovery of her irredenta; 10) autonomy for the ethnic nationalities of Austria-Hungary; 11) restoration of the Balkan states and access to the Adriatic for Serbia; 12) autonomy for the subject peoples of the Ottoman Empire and free navigation through the Dardanelles; 13) an independent Poland with access to the sea; 14) a "general association of nations" offering "mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity."

In two other speeches that year—the "Four Principles" talk on February 11 and the "Five Particulars" address on September 27—Wilson further explicated his views on national self-determination. If not quite as revolutionary as Lenin's call for a worldwide class war, they were nevertheless quite radical enough for countries whose notions of foreign policy remained tied to the new imperialism of the Victorian Age and Bismarck's fixation on a European balance of power. Introduced as a standard in world diplomacy through the Paris Peace Conference, they would cause no little trouble throughout the rest of the 20th century, not just in a Europe (and Asia) headed for another world war but in the United States's own imperial backyard: Latin America, the Pacific Islands, and Southeast Asia.

In opposition to Wilson at the conference, Clemenceau, whose nation had suffered the worst destruction in the war, not only wanted to secure France against future German attack but, having lived through the humiliation of the Franco-Prussian War and now having seen the flower of French youth and young manhood crushed, favored a vengeful, punitive, and restrictive treaty. Britain's Lloyd George had his own agendas. Although moderate in his personal views, Lloyd George had been elected on the promise that Germany would be punished. Moreover, he had little taste for President Wilson's idealism and was concerned that the Fourteen Points would interfere with British colonial policy.

## Terms

Ultimately, France conceded its principal demand, that the left bank of the Rhine be detached from Germany and put under French military control, in exchange for British and American promises of future alliance and support. Nevertheless, the Treaty of Versailles—not negotiated with Germany but simply presented to it as an accomplished fact—was harsh, punitive, and humiliating. Not only was Germany forced to admit its guilt in having instigated the war, but it had to relinquish large tracts of territory, disarm, yield to Allied occupation of the Saar and Rhineland, and agree to pay economically devastating reparations. Moreover, the treaty by no means conformed to Wilson's Fourteen Points. Nevertheless, Wilson was gratified by the realization of his 14th point, the creation of the League of Nations.

The Treaty of Versailles is a book-length document, comprising almost 300 printed pages and covering

- The creation of the League of Nations
- The boundaries of Germany
- "Political Clauses for Europe"
- "German Rights and Interests Outside Germany"
- The disarmament of Germany
- The repatriation of prisoners of war and the maintenance of soldiers' graves
- Penalties ("The Allied and Associated Powers publicly arraign William II of Hohenzollern, formerly German emperor, for a supreme offence against international morality and the sanctity of treaties")
- Reparations
- "Financial Clauses," pursuant to reparations
- "Economic Clauses," governing commercial and trade relations, debts, and property rights
- "Aerial Navigation" (an important recognition of the new technology, framed on the model of rights governing navigation of the sea)
- Provisions governing ports, waterways, and railways

- International regulations governing "humane conditions of labor" in order to establish a lasting peace based on "social justice."

The only major point on which the Allies unanimously agreed was the return of Alsace-Lorraine (lost to Germany in the Franco-Prussian War) to France:

#### Section V Alsace Lorraine

The HIGH CONTRACTING PARTIES, recognizing the moral obligation to redress the wrong done by Germany in 1871 both to the rights of France and to the wishes of the population of Alsace and Lorraine, which were separated from their country in spite of the solemn protest of their representatives at the Assembly of Bordeaux,

Agree upon the following Articles:

#### ARTICLE 51

The territories which were ceded to Germany in accordance with the Preliminaries of Peace signed at Versailles on February 26, 1871, and the Treaty of Frankfurt of May 10, 1871, are restored to French sovereignty as from the date of the Armistice of November 11, 1918.

The provisions of the Treaties establishing the delimitation of the frontiers before 1871 shall be restored.

#### ARTICLE 52

The German Government shall hand over without delay to the French Government all archives, registers, plans, titles and documents of every kind concerning the civil, military, financial, judicial or other administrations of the territories restored to French sovereignty. If any of these documents, archives, registers, titles or plans have been misplaced, they will be restored by the German Government on the demand of the French Government.

#### ARTICLE 53

Separate agreements shall be made between France and Germany dealing with the interests of the inhabitants of the territories referred to in Article 51, particularly as regards their civil rights, their business and the exercise of their professions, it being understood that Germany undertakes as from the present date to recognize and accept the regulations laid down in the Annex hereto regarding the nationality of the inhabitants or natives of the said territories, not to claim at any time or in any place whatsoever as German nationals those who shall have been declared on any ground to be French, to receive all others in her territory, and to conform, as regards the property of German nationals in the territories indicated in Article 51, with the provisions of Article 297 and the Annex to Section IV of Part X (Economic Clauses) of the present Treaty.

Those German nationals who without acquiring French nationality shall receive permission from the

French Government to reside in the said territories shall not be subjected to the provisions of the said Article.

#### ARTICLE 54

Those persons who have regained French nationality in virtue of paragraph 1 of the Annex hereto will be held to be Alsace-Lorrainers for the purposes of the present Section.

The persons referred to in paragraph 2 of the said Annex will from the day on which they have claimed French nationality be held to be Alsace-Lorrainers with retroactive effect as from November 11, 1918. For those whose application is rejected, the privilege will terminate at the date of the refusal.

Such juridical persons will also have the status of Alsace-Lorrainers as shall have been recognized as possessing this quality whether by the French administrative authorities or by a judicial decision.

#### ARTICLE 55

The territories referred to in Article 51 shall return to France free and quit of all public debts under the conditions laid down in Article 255 of Part IX (Financial Clauses) of the present Treaty.

#### ARTICLE 56

In conformity with the provisions of Article 256 of Part IX (Financial Clauses) of the present Treaty, France shall enter into possession of all property and estate, within the territories referred to in Article 51, which belong to the German Empire or German States, without any payment or credit on this account to any of the States ceding the territories.

This provision applies to all movable or immovable property of public or private domain together with all rights whatsoever belonging to the German Empire or German States or to their administrative areas.

Crown property and the property of the former Emperor or other German sovereigns shall be assimilated to property of the public domain.

#### ARTICLE 57

Germany shall not take any action, either by means of stamping or by any other legal or administrative measures not applying equally to the rest of her territory, which may be to the detriment of the legal value or redeemability of Germany monetary instruments or monies which, at the date of the signature of the present Treaty, are legally current, and at that date are in the possession of the French Government.

#### ARTICLE 58

A special Convention will determine the conditions for repayment in marks of the exceptional war expenditure advanced during the course of the war by Alsace-Lorraine or by the public bodies in Alsace-Lorraine on account of the Empire in accordance with German law, such as payment to the families of persons mobilized, requisitions, billeting of troops, and assistance to persons who have been evacuated.

In fixing the amount of these sums Germany shall be credited with that portion which Alsace-Lorraine

## Consequences

It is not surprising that on May 7, 1919, when a German delegation headed by German foreign minister Graf Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau was presented with the treaty terms, they denounced it. Brockdorff-Rantzau protested that the treaty abrogated the Fourteen Points, which had provided the basis for the armistice. He also insisted, quite rightly, that the economic provisions of the treaty were impossible to fulfill. Germany's chancellor, Philipp Scheidemann, likewise denounced the treaty when it was presented to him. However, the Allies maintained a stringent naval blockade of Germany. In protest, both Scheidemann and Brockdorff-Rantzau resigned on June 21. That same day, at Scapa Flow, where the German High Seas Fleet lay at anchor, German sailors scuttled all 50 of their warships, thereby depriving the Allies of this great prize. The new German chancellor, Gustav Bauer, sent another delegation to Versailles and, on June 28, signed the document only after informing the Allies that he accepted the treaty in order to alleviate the hardships caused by the "inhuman" blockade.

Much of the treaty was simply ignored. For example, neither the kaiser nor anyone else was tried for war crimes following World War I. Wilhelm fled to Holland after the war, and the Dutch government declined to extradite him to the jurisdiction of the Allies. He remained in Dutch exile until his death dur-

ing the next world war, on June 8, 1941. In practice, Germany also increasingly ignored the provisions aimed at destroying its "militarism" as it rearmed under Adolf Hitler during the 1930s. Ironically, the abolition of conscription meant that the core of the post-World War I German army was an all-volunteer force—in effect, an elite body of professional soldiers around whom Hitler and his commanders built a highly effective and efficient army.

In another irony, one of history's bitterest, the United States ultimately failed to accept the Treaty of Versailles. Many in the U.S. Senate objected to joining the League of Nations, which, through President Wilson's efforts, was part and parcel of the Versailles treaty. Wilson campaigned vigorously for acceptance of the treaty, traveling across the nation to garner popular support for it. In the process, he destroyed his health, suffering a collapse in Pueblo, Colorado, and, subsequently, a debilitating stroke. Ultimately, the United States arranged separate treaties with Germany, Austria, and Hungary.

While some of the Allies were gratified by having punished Germany, the terrible fact was that the Treaty of Versailles created the political, economic, and emotional climate that promoted the rise of Adolf Hitler and Nazism. The product of the so-called War to End All Wars, the Versailles treaty sowed the seeds of what seemed inconceivable in 1919: an even more horrendous, costly, and destructive war.