

The Versailles Treaty

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When the Great War (World War I) finally ended in 1918, the leaders of the victorious Allies gathered in Paris to arrange the peace. The final treaty was signed at Versailles, a palace near Paris, and thus it is called the Treaty of Versailles.

The Treaty of Versailles adjusted the boundaries of several nations in western Europe, disarmed Germany and forced the Germans to pay for the cost of the war. It also established an international organization, the League of Nations, to help keep the peace in the future. Three related treaties with German allies in Eastern Europe also created a number of new nations in what had been the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In creating new states and adjusting national boundaries, the leaders had several things in mind. Their main intent was to allow self-determination for every national group in Europe. They also wanted to draw boundaries that would ensure each nation's security. With the exception of Woodrow Wilson, most the leaders hoped to create a new "balance of power" like the one that had kept Europe at peace after the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

Despite their hopes, the peace established at Versailles fell apart in just twenty years. Within fifteen years both Germany and Italy were led by fascist dictators bent on aggression. In 1939 another Great War (World War II) broke out. Why had the peace failed? Did the agreements reached at Versailles help pave the way to World War II?

In this lesson, you will be looking at the goals each nation sought to achieve at Versailles. You will be asked to compare those goals with the actual terms of the Treaty. Finally, you will be asked to judge whether or not the Treaty of Versailles led to World War II.

The Goals of the Diplomats

France. The war on the Western Front had been fought mainly on French soil and much of the eastern part of that nation had been destroyed. France wanted to insure that it would never again be attacked by Germany. She wanted a territory called Alsace-Lorraine that Germany had taken after a war in 1870 returned to her control. France also wanted her national economy rebuilt.

Great Britain. British Prime Minister Lloyd George said that Germany should pay for the war. He said, "We shall squeeze the orange until the pips (pits) squeak." Britain also wanted to ensure its control of the seas and its status as a global, not just a European power.

United States. Woodrow Wilson was an idealist who believed that World War I could be the "war to end all wars." In his Fourteen Points he called for a system of world security and the creation of new nations formed according to the wills of their peoples. Generally, he favored a lenient peace settlement for Germany and wanted no land or reparations from that country.

Germany. Germany had no voice in writing the Versailles Treaty, but was still a party to it. The German government hoped for a fair peace settlement. They did not want to lose large amounts of territory. More than anything else, they wanted to keep their national "self respect." Most Germans did not think they alone were responsible for starting the war.

The Terms of the Treaty

Territorial Provisions. In all, Germany lost more than ten percent of the land on the continent of Europe that she had held before the war. Alsace-Lorraine was returned to France. German territory in the east, such as Danzig, was given to the new nation of Poland. In addition, Britain took control of all German colonies overseas.

Military Provisions. Germany was essentially disarmed. Its army was limited to 100,000 men. It was not allowed to have military airplanes, tanks or artillery. The navy was destroyed. In the future the German navy was limited to no more than twelve warships and no submarines. The Rhineland, an area between the Rhine River and France, was demilitarized and made into a neutral buffer zone. No German fortifications were permitted there.

Political Provisions. Article 231 said that Germany and her allies were aggressors in the war and must accept "responsibility...for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allies...and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war." The Treaty also called for the establishment of a League of Nations through which the nations of the world might work together to provide for their collective security in the future.

Economic Provisions. Germany was forced to pay war reparations to the Allies amounting to about five billion dollars over the next few years. In addition, France was given control of the Saar for fifteen years. The Saar is a region rich in coal and iron. Its resources helped the French rebuild their economy. Similarly, large portions of the German merchant and fishing fleets were turned over to the Allies along with large numbers of railway locomotives and freight cars. Germany also had to deliver coal to France and Belgium and pay for French troops protecting the demilitarized Rhineland.

Related Treaties Covering Eastern Europe. In a related set of treaties with Germany's allies, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Bulgaria, a number of new nations were formed in Eastern Europe. The treaty makers tried to include each national group in Eastern Europe in its own nation, but that proved impossible. Still, the leaders tried to form nations with firm boundaries, based as much as possible on a common language, ethnic identity and religion.