

## Topic Page: [Treaty of Versailles](#)

Definition: **Versailles, Treaty of** from *Chambers Dictionary of World History*

A peace treaty drawn up between Germany and the Allied powers at Paris. Of the 434 articles, the most controversial was article 231 assigning to Germany and her allies' responsibility for causing World War I, and establishing liability for reparation payments. Germany lost all overseas colonies, and considerable territory to Poland in the East. The Rhineland was demilitarized and to be occupied by Allied troops for up to 15 years, and German armed forces were strictly limited. → Paris Peace Conference

### Summary Article: **Versailles, Treaty of**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Peace treaty after World War I between the Allies (except the USA and China) and Germany, signed on 28 June 1919. It established the League of Nations, an international organization intended to solve disputes by arbitration. Germany surrendered Alsace-Lorraine to France, and large areas in the east to Poland, and made smaller cessions to Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Belgium, and Denmark. The Rhineland was demilitarized, German rearmament was restricted, and Germany agreed to pay reparations for war damage; see also Germany: history 1919–49, **the peace settlement**. The treaty was never ratified by the USA, which signed separate treaties with Germany and Austria in 1921. The terms of Versailles and its reshaping of Europe contributed to the outbreak of World War II.

**Peace conference** Following the armistice that ended World War I on 11 November 1918, a peace conference was organized for the victorious Allies at the palace of Versailles, near Paris, France. Representatives of the 27 Allied and Associated powers gathered in the Great Hall of Mirrors in Versailles in January 1919. Germany was not invited; as the defeated party, it was only required to sign the treaty once the cost of defeat had been established.

The conference was chaired by the French prime minister Georges Clémenceau, and the proceedings were dominated by Clémenceau; the British prime minister David Lloyd George); and US president Woodrow Wilson). Each of the three major allied powers, France, the UK, and the USA, had different aims for the peace conference, and different opinions about the treatment of the Germans.

**Aims of the Allies** The French were the most determined to punish the Germans for the war, and make them pay for the destruction of French property that it had caused. Most of the battles of the Western Front had been on French soil, and the damage done to French towns, villages, factories, and farmland was immense. The French also wanted Germany to be weakened, so that it would be unable to attack France again.

Lloyd George was in a difficult position. The British people were unsympathetic towards the Germans and demanded heavy retribution, whereas Lloyd George feared that too harsh a punishment would inflame the passions of the German people, making another war to regain lost prestige, lands, and property more likely.

US president Wilson was the leader most likely to be sympathetic to Germany. He went to Versailles with a list of Fourteen Points that he believed would solve the problems in Europe that had led to war. Wilson proposed such ideas as self-determination for all peoples in the world, free and open access to the seas to allow trade to flow, and the setting up of a League of Nations to deal with any future

disputes through diplomacy rather than war.

The US president adopted a less confrontational stance towards Germany than Clémenceau or Lloyd George. His main aim was to avoid future war, not to punish Germany for the war that had just ended. Wilson was able to adopt a more conciliatory attitude because the USA had been less involved in both the causes of war and the fighting. It was also geographically a long way away from Europe should war recommence. Although the USA had lost some 126,000 troops, this was small in comparison to the estimated 702,500 British dead or the near 1.4 million lost by France. The USA had suffered no physical damage during the war, and no part of the war had been fought on US territory. The French, meanwhile, had lost many thousands of buildings, including some 300,000 houses and 6,000 factories, during the war. One-tenth of French territory had been destroyed by 1919, with many parts of northern France virtually uninhabitable because of unexploded bombs and destroyed houses. The USA had become the most economically powerful nation in the world by 1919, while the European nations had run up huge debts with the USA during the war, and their economies had suffered much damage. Both France and Britain needed money from Germany to rebuild their economies, and were anxious to prevent Germany from being able to go to war again. In addition to this the USA was more detached from the history and emotion of Europe and the war. The tensions that had existed between France and Germany since the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), when Germany took the French territories of Alsace and Lorraine, were still fresh, while the naval race of the early 1900s that had caused bitterness between Germany and Britain remained in the minds of British politicians. The USA could afford to be more generous to Germany at Versailles than either the British or French, and US president Wilson was inclined to be so.

**Acceptance of blame** One of the first things agreed at Versailles was that Germany would have to accept responsibility for the war. Acceptance of blame appeared in Clause 231 of the treaty, later known as the 'War Guilt clause'. Once Germany was made to acknowledge that it was responsible for the war, it would follow that it was fair to charge them for its results. Germany, however, did not accept this view, pointing out that all the countries of Europe had contributed in some part to the outbreak of hostilities. Many Germans did not even accept that they had lost the war in 1918. However, the democratic government of Germany's new Weimar Republic had to sign the treaty in June 1919, as it could not restart the war with any chance of success. Food supplies were running out and the munitions industry was unable to match the production of France, Britain, and the USA. Those in Germany who opposed the Treaty of Versailles branded the signatories as the 'November criminals', and accused them of betraying the German people.

**German territorial losses** Germany had to give up large areas of territory to other nations. Alsace and Lorraine were returned to France, having been taken by Germany in 1871. The Treaty of Versailles gave some border territories the right to vote whether to stay within Germany. The mostly Danish, northern part of Schleswig, a duchy that had been taken from Denmark in 1864, voted to return to Denmark in 1920. The region of Eupen-et-Malmédy, given to Prussia in 1814, voted to transfer to Belgium, even though Eupen was predominantly German-speaking. The loss of western regions that were culturally non-German was hard but more acceptable than the Allies' solution in east Germany. A huge area of eastern Germany was given to the newly independent state of Poland to provide it with access to the sea. Known as the Polish Corridor, it cut off the German region of East Prussia from the rest of Germany. All Germany's colonies, gathered during Germany's efforts to gain equality with other European colonizing powers before 1914, were taken away and given to the Allied states as mandates.

Although mandated territories were officially the responsibility of the League of Nations, and were only administered by the Allies, to the German people it looked as though Germany's colonies were being annexed, particularly by France and the UK.

The land settlement defeated US president Wilson's attempts to create a just and lasting peace. Wilson supported the removal of certain areas from Germany, such as Alsace and Lorraine, but wanted the former German colonies to become independent nations. He also expected the British and French to grant independence to some of their colonies, but was frustrated here, too.

**Financial compensation** France and the British public were successful on the issue of reparations, or compensation. Having signed the War Guilt clause, Germany was ordered to pay the UK, France, and Belgium a total sum of 132 billion gold Marks (£6,600,000,000) in damages for the war. The German government knew that they could never afford such a vast sum, but had no choice but to agree to the fixed payments. Chief Treasury representative for the UK, John Maynard Keynes, one of the leading economists of the 20th century, warned the Allies of the danger of demanding such high payments and resigned in protest over the treaty's financial terms.

**Results of the treaty** The UK and France were satisfied with the Treaty of Versailles, believing that Germany had been suitably punished and weakened. US president Wilson achieved the setting up of the League of Nations, and the territorial settlement, particularly in Eastern Europe, reflected his idea of self-determination for peoples. However, on his return to the USA Wilson found that his views were not shared by other US politicians or the American people. The Republican US Senate and House of Representatives refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles or let the USA take part in Wilson's League of Nations. They preferred to remove themselves from contact with Europe, feeling that it would only lead to more trouble and cost. After making separate treaties with Germany and Austria in 1921, the USA returned to the isolationist policies of the 19th century.

German reaction proved to be just as Lloyd-George and Wilson had forecast. The politicians who signed the treaty were attacked as traitors and removed from office. The Versailles settlement sowed the seeds of the rise of Adolf Hitler and Nazism by crippling Germany financially in the post-war years. In order to meet reparations and rebuild the economy, the government printed more money, leading to hyperinflation and economic disaster. Virtual bankruptcy forced the Weimar government to stop reparation payments in 1923, leading to a Franco-Belgian invasion of the Ruhr, Germany's industrial heartland. The politicians of the democratic Weimar Republic were perceived as weak and ineffectual, opening opportunities for extremists such as Hitler to gain more power. Although the Treaty of Versailles was only one of the factors contributing to the eventual collapse of the Weimar Republic, its harsh terms were at the root of many of its problems.

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## Chicago

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## Harvard

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