

The Treaty of Versailles and the Impact on Germany

By Walter S. Zapotoczny

The Paris Peace Conference opened on January 12, 1919. Meetings were held at various locations in and around Paris until January 20, 1920. Leaders of 32 states representing about 75% of the world's population, attended. However, the five major powers, the United States, Britain, France, Italy, and Japan dominated negotiations. Important figures in these negotiations included Georges Clemenceau (France) David Lloyd George (Britain), Vittorio Orlando (Italy), and Woodrow Wilson (United States). The Versailles Treaty was one of the products of the conference. The Germans believed that the treaty would be based on President Wilson's Fourteen Points, which offered a framework for a just peace, and the hopes that any future international tension would be prevented. The Germans believed the Fourteen Points would have resulted in drastically less devastation to Germany if used in the treaty. However, the Big Four were determined to punish Germany for the war, and so they did.

This treaty held Germany solemnly responsible for WWI. Germany was forced to pay reparations totaling 132,000,000,000 in gold marks, they lost 1/8 of its land, all of its colonies, all overseas financial assets, a new map of Europe was carved out of Germany, and the German military was basically non-existent. To the German people they were being ruthlessly punished for a war not only were not responsible for but had to fight. The main terms of the Versailles Treaty were:

- (1) the surrender of all German colonies as League of Nations mandates
- (2) the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France
- (3) cession of Eupen-Malmedy to Belgium, Memel to Lithuania, the Hultschin district to Czechoslovakia, Poznan, parts of East Prussia and Upper Silesia to Poland
- (4) Danzig to become a free city
- (5) plebiscites to be held in northern Schleswig to settle the Danish-German frontier
- (6) occupation and special status for the Saar under French control
- (7) demilitarization and a fifteen-year occupation of the Rhineland
- (8) German reparations of £6,600 million
- (9) a ban on the union of Germany and Austria
- (10) an acceptance of Germany's guilt in causing the war
- (11) provision for the trial of the former Kaiser and other war leaders
- (12) limitation of Germany's army to 100,000 men with no conscription, no tanks, no heavy artillery, no poison-gas supplies, no aircraft and no airships
- (13) the limitation of the German Navy to vessels under 100,000 tons, with no submarines

Germany signed the Versailles Treaty under protest. The USA Congress refused to ratify the treaty. Many people in France and Britain were angry that there was no trial of the Kaiser or the other war leaders.

The treaty devastated Germany politically and economically. Because of the treaty, many Germans were desperate to find a new leader to get them out of the Great Depression, which they blamed on the extravagant reparations they had to pay to the Allies. They found this leader in Adolf Hitler. Hitler believed Germany had given up too easily to the allies and still had a chance to win the war because there had been no fighting on German soil. He encouraged many German's feelings of being betrayed

by their own government and therefore thought they had no obligation to follow the treaty; this group became the Nazi's. They still felt like they had more fighting to do and the Versailles Treaty fueled their anger. It created aggressive resentment and nationalism in Germany. There was a lot of increasing hostility towards the allied nations. Leaders like Hitler saw this treaty as something that weakened the great empire he was striving for. He didn't sign it and he was not about to follow it. But because of this treaty he was able to conquer and manipulate people by justifying his actions on the unfairness of the Versailles Treaty. This led to the emergence of the National Socialist Party in Germany.

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