

The Treaty of Versailles

When America and her allies (known as the Triple Entente) sat down at the negotiating table with Germany, they did so with absolute power. That is, if the Germans refused any part of the unconditional surrender, the Entente would occupy Germany and end its newly-found statehood. Unwilling to risk this, Germany was forced to succumb to a number of harsh, infuriating demands. Some say that the Versailles Treaty was too harsh to allow Germany to reintegrate itself into a “new” post-war Europe, but too weak to completely destroy Germany’s ability to make war. It is on the Treaty of Versailles that most historians place the blame for Hitler’s ascent and for World War II.

Woodrow Wilson was a very, very liberal (some believe nearly socialist) president in a time where progressivism was the fad. He submitted 14 points that he believed the German government should submit to. One member of the Entente’s delegation joked “The Good Lord only needed 10 commandments, Wilson needs 14.” Wilson believed that the total aim of the peace treaty should be to prevent war from ever again happening. In order to encourage a German surrender, Wilson promised a treaty that would go fairly light on Germany. For better or worse, he was unable to deliver on this promise due to America’s relative lack of involvement in the war (we got involved very near the end and sent very few troops)—which had as its result America’s loss of bargaining power and influence among the Entente.

The main points of Wilson’s plan were: for European domestic and economic equalization (and the riddance of Germany’s satellite states), for the independence of Belgium, for the giving of Alsace-Lorraine back to France, for access to the Baltic Sea for the land-locked Poland, for war reparations to pay for the damage done by invading German troops in France and Belgium, and for a League of Nations to settle all international disputes before they resulted in wars.

The Entente gladly incorporated all this into the Treaty but exaggerated many of them to further weaken Germany. They limited the German army to a size of 100,000 men, demilitarized a large section of Germany nearest France, and forbade the German ownership of military aircraft, poison gas, or any naval units. The merchant marine and navy were to give their ships to Britain (they gave their merchant marine but scuttled their navy). Further, huge war reparations were to be paid, the extent of which were undetermined at the time (so Germany was signing a blank check). Expectations concerning these reparations were huge since the Entente wanted Germany to pay their war expenses and damages done to France and Belgium. The Treaty also required Germany to put many of her “war heroes” up for trial.

Germany sat down for peace negotiations thinking that Wilson’s ideas would greatly affect the treaty-making and that his fourteen points (in all their moderation) would be the predominant part of the treaty. Britain, France, and

Italy, however, all had far greater European interests and had been more effected by the war. They, therefore, had the most influence in the treaty-making, exaggerating greatly Wilson's original plans and making the Germans feel that Wilson had lied to them.

In fact, Germany nearly lost far more than what they did. Eventually they defaulted on nearly all of their war reparations (and nobody intervened, paving the way to isolationism and another World War), but France wanted even more far-reaching economic concessions. They issued claim to nearly all of the Sudetenland, the center of German industrialism. This would have crippled Germany forever. Fortunately for Germany, this didn't become part of the treaty. However, economic crippling would have prevented remilitarization in the 1930's.

America was strictly isolationist at this time. We just barely got involved in time to have any say in negotiations, and we didn't want any part in a "new world order." With this in mind, the Senate refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles due to Wilson's League of Nations article. The United States didn't want to be involved in foreign, political wars. We wanted to be left alone. As a result, the Senate was strongly against the Versailles Treaty and refused to ratify it. We made a separate peace with Germany.

In the end, the Treaty of Versailles almost surely caused World War II. Had it been softer on Germany, the Weimar Republic would have been stronger and would not have faced as much economic and social turmoil. Had the treaty been harsher, Germany would not have had the power to make war. Even with a miserably ineffective treaty, World War II could still have been averted. Under Chamberlain's nose, Germany began to remilitarize and was allowed to annex enormous territories under Hitler in the 1930's. Nobody would make even the slightest move to enforce the clauses of the Treaty of Versailles, and this was the reason that Hitler's army became powerful enough to threaten European peace once again. The faults in the Treaty of Versailles were great, but the faults of those who refused to later enforce it were far greater.