



The terms and effects of the Treaty of Versailles

This is a transcript of the [Terms and Effects of the Treaty of Versailles](#) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

In my previous podcast, I explained the aims of the Big Three (by whom I mean the leaders of Britain, France and the USA) when they drew up the Treaty of Versailles. In this podcast we're going to look at the terms of the Treaty and how different countries reacted to it.

To remember the terms of the Treaty you might find it helpful to use the mnemonic GARGLE: Guilt, Arms, Reparations, German Territory, and League of Nations (that's the 'LE' in League to make GARGLE!)

Firstly, Germany had to accept guilt or blame for starting the war. Unsurprisingly, this is referred to as the war guilt clause. The logic went that if Germany was to be punished, it firstly needed to accept that it had caused the war in the first place.

Secondly, all of Germany's armed forces were severely limited. The army was only allowed a maximum of 100,000 soldiers, and conscription was banned which meant that any soldiers who did join the army had to do so voluntarily. Furthermore, Germany wasn't allowed to own any armoured vehicles such as tanks, it couldn't have any submarines, and although it was permitted to have civilian aeroplanes it wasn't allowed military ones.

Thirdly, Germany had to pay reparations to France, Britain and Belgium – this was financial compensation to pay for the damage caused during the war. The final amount of £6,600 million British pounds wasn't actually set until 1921. It was such an enormous figure at the time that Germany wouldn't have finished paying the bill until 1984 – 65 years after the war was over.

German territory was also affected by the Treaty of Versailles. As well as losing all its overseas colonies, mostly to Britain and France, the border territory of Alsace-Lorraine went back to France having been taken from them after the Franco-Prussian War of 1871. Germany also lost control over the Saar – a very valuable coal mining area. West Prussia and Upper Silesia were taken away and given to Poland and created the Polish Corridor, while the city of Danzig was put under control of the new League of Nations although in reality was given to Poland to use as a sea port. In addition to this, any future attempt to unify Germany and Austria's 6.5million German citizens was forbidden.



Finally, the Big Three agreed that as previous methods of keeping peace had failed, it was important to establish an organisation whose job it was to sort out international disputes. Consequently they all agreed to set up the League of Nations. However, Germany itself wasn't actually invited to join the League until it had shown to the other members that it was a so-called 'peace loving country'.

The people of France were delighted with the Treaty. It hadn't punished Germany quite as much as some had wanted, but there was no doubt that the war was over and France had won! On the streets of Paris there were patriotic celebrations, convinced that the threat from Germany had ended.

The majority of the British public also supported the Treaty. With most families having been hit by the cruel realities of war, they felt that Germany had got what it deserved and saw Lloyd George as a hero.

However, some British people were worried. Their main concern was whether the Treaty really would bring peace, as nobody really knew how Germany would react to it. But these people were in the minority. Most of the British public thought the Germans complaining for no reason. After all, when Germany imposed harsh terms on France back in 1871 after the Franco-Prussian War, France had managed to begin rebuilding its economy within less than a decade.

But what did Germany think about the Treaty of Versailles, and why?

You probably won't be surprised to know that the Germans were not very happy with the terms of the Treaty. They had no say in the Treaty – they were just told to sign it – but if they didn't the war would have restarted and Germany would likely have been completely shattered. But as they didn't feel that they had started the war on their own, many Germans felt that it was very unfair that they had to accept the war guilt clause. Furthermore, the German government that had to sign the Treaty was not the same government that took Germany into the war in the first place. The Kaiser had abdicated and fled the country, and a new Republic had been set up in 1918. But it was the new government that had to agree to the Treaty, and it was arguably punishing the wrong people.

The Treaty had taken away 10% of Germany's land and 12.5% of its population. These Germans had now been absorbed into other countries thanks to the redrawing of national borders. Millions of former Germans were now ruled by foreigners. To make matters worse, part of Germany – the area known as East Prussia – was now completely cut off from the rest of Germany by the Polish Corridor. Furthermore, the limits on the army were humiliating for such a large country. The reduction was intended to stop Germany from being strong enough



to invade other countries, but to many Germans it seemed as if they wouldn't be able to defend themselves if someone else attacked them.

One of the biggest challenges for people assessing the Treaty of Versailles is the effect of hindsight – the knowledge of what happened next. We know that Hitler used arguments against the Treaty to help him become the leader of Germany, which in turn went on to contribute to the outbreak of the Second World War. However, it's important to try to forget that for a while. We should try to assess the Treaty only in terms of the time it was created. Let's therefore try to remain objective, and consider both sides of the argument – evidence for the Treaty, and against the Treaty.

So, what evidence is there that the Treaty was a fair agreement? Firstly, the final terms of Treaty were much less harsh on Germany than public opinion in the winning countries demanded. In many cases, in fact, the peacemakers held back. An example of this was the French public's demand to completely break Germany apart into a series of small weak states – the Big Three refused to include such a severe term. Secondly, it could be argued that the Treaty was much less harsh than the Germans might have imposed if they had won. We know that the Germans had been incredibly tough on Russia in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918, and sources produced at the time showed that German policy had always been to spend huge amounts of money on winning the war, and pay back their war debts by imposing massive reparations on the losing nations. In that sense, the reparations imposed in the Treaty of Versailles could be seen as only what Germany would have done if they had won. Thirdly, it's important to note the Treaty alone did not cause Germany's future problems. The new government, struggling to run Germany after four years of catastrophic war, contributed to its problems as well. It's generally accepted by economic historians that Germany could have paid the reparations bill if it had wanted to, and as soon as a good leader – Gustav Stresemann – took charge after the problems of 1923, Germany sorted out its economy very quickly. That he was able to fix things can be seen as evidence that the Treaty wasn't as bad as Germans in 1919 were making out.

However, these points need to be balanced with a number of negative issues that suggest Treaty was unfair. Firstly, you could argue that it punished the wrong people. The German government that was forced to sign the Treaty was not the same government that took Germany into the war. While many people argued that the Treaty should have tried to build up and support the fragile, newly-elected, government instead, it knocked it back before it even had a chance to get started. Secondly, you could argue that the Treaty should not have placed guilt for the war on Germany alone. It was a shared responsibility, and other countries should have shouldered some of the blame as well. Thirdly, the Treaty damaged Germany enough to cause resentment but left it strong enough to seek revenge in the future.



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As with all historical debate, it's important to address both sides of the argument. There is evidence to support the view that the Treaty was a wise and fair agreement, but there is also evidence to suggest that it was – as some people called it at the time – ‘stupid’, or, at the very least, unfair. Make sure that you present at least two or more pieces of evidence to support each side because, if you're asked to answer a question on this topic, you will need to back up your points with solid evidence and examples to explain your answer.