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# German reactions to the Treaty of Versailles

Destruction of German weapons in compliance with the Treaty of Versailles

**Tim Chapman** investigates why the Treaty of Versailles was universally hated in postwar Germany

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## Argument

### Not fair, so fight back?

Germans believed that the terms of the Treaty of Versailles were far too harsh and had been dictated to them by France and Britain rather than negotiated. Thus they felt immediate revulsion for it, and lasting resentment against everything to do with it.

Vengeance, German nation!’ shrieked the front page of the *Deutsche Zeitung*. The stark headlines of this daily newspaper on 28 June 1919 demanded revenge in response to the punishing terms of the Treaty of Versailles that formally ended the First World War. The newspaper seemed to speak for every member of a nation that had hardly been so united before at any stage in its history — such were

the feelings of anger, hatred and xenophobic rage. But what was it that angered German society so deeply? What motivated the outpouring of protest? And how did this rage find expression across the country?

### The circumstances of peace, 1918–19

When the armistice was signed on 11 November 1918 Germany had not been invaded. It had not surrendered and it had agreed only to a cease-fire — that is, to an end to hostilities. It did so just in time, as the might of the US armed forces was beginning to advance the Allied war effort and it was only a matter of time before Germany was overcome.

While the German generals, Hindenburg and Lüdendorff, accepted that Germany could no longer win the war, the civilian population in the Fatherland and regular troops in the trenches were unaware of how precarious the country’s position had become.





The 'Big Three':  
Clemenceau, Wilson  
and Lloyd George

## The Fourteen Points

- 1 Renunciation of secret treaties
- 2 Freedom of the seas advocated
- 3 Worldwide trade barriers to be removed
- 4 Arms reductions proposed
- 5 International arbitration of colonial disputes
- 6 Removal of the German Army from Russia
- 7 Belgium to be returned to pre-war independence
- 8 France to recover Alsace-Lorraine and be freed of the German occupying army
- 9, 10, 11, 12 Self-determination for Italians, citizens of Austria-Hungary, the Balkan states, Turkey and the former Turkish empire
- 13 Independence for Poland, with access to the sea
- 14 A League of Nations to be created to guarantee political and territorial independence for all states

own future (through self-determination) and international relations were governed by a new peace-keeping organisation (what became the League of Nations). This was what the German people anticipated would form the basis of the peace treaty when it was eventually formulated.

### The 'Big Three'

Wilson was, however, just one of the 'Big Three' leaders who attended the peace conferences in Paris from January to June 1919. He had to negotiate with the leaders of France and Britain — Clemenceau and Lloyd George respectively — who each had a different outlook and a determination to satisfy their own country's expectations.

Clemenceau had seen the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), with humiliating results, so he felt that France's opportunity to settle scores was at hand. The horrors and destruction of 1914–18 only reinforced this determination to weaken and punish Germany. Between Wilson's idealism and Clemenceau's bitterness, Lloyd George tried to be practical and find compromises suitable to both sides while also ensuring Britain's own interests were protected. This meant dismantling Germany's small colonial empire and cutting down the battle fleet it had built as a rival navy to Britain's.

Time was against all three men. A speedy solution was needed to maintain stability in Europe as each of them feared the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia might spread communism across the continent and threaten democracy. Moreover, Spanish influenza

defeat of France: in  
1870–71 Prussia defeated  
France, bombarded Paris,  
took the provinces of  
Alsace and Lorraine and  
assumed the position of  
mainland Europe's most  
powerful state.

The old *Kaiserreich* (imperial Germany, ruled by Kaiser Wilhelm II) had not kept them informed of the situation and what news they had received seemed to be cause for optimism.

US President Woodrow Wilson had tabled a set of proposals for peace — the Fourteen Points (see box) — in which there was no mention of punishment. He hoped, instead, to create a new world order in which countries disarmed, people decided their





A demonstration in Berlin against the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, June 1919

continued to infect — causing more deaths around the world than the war itself. Germany alone had seen 400,000 civilians and 190,000 troops succumb to it. This was partly because the British had maintained a naval blockade around Germany since 1916 and the population had been physically weakened as a result. Adults were typically eating half the number of calories they needed each day and, in Germany's capital city, Berliners had been reduced to bartering firewood for potato peelings, such was the need for basic resources. In these circumstances a peace treaty was needed urgently but was extremely difficult to negotiate.

## Terms of the Treaty of Versailles

The 440 articles (or clauses) of the Treaty of Versailles broke down into three main areas.

### 1 Territorial aspects

First, the territorial aspects of the treaty saw Germany lose 13% of its land, mostly from around its frontiers. Unsurprisingly, Alsace and Lorraine were lost to France, but so was the Saar (for 15 years, 1920–35) and the French ensured the Rhineland was demilitarised lest Germany launch another attack by that route.

The territorial losses that aggravated Germans the most were West Prussia, Posen and Thorn, given to Poland as a corridor to the sea. In part this was because it contained so many Germans, but it also meant that East Prussia and neighbouring areas (such as Allenstein and Marienwerder) were isolated from the main body of the German state. Land in northern Schleswig was also ceded to Denmark. According to historian A. J. P. Taylor, 'All [Germans] repudiated the loss of the Polish lands.'

### 2 Economic aspects

Key economic assets were also targeted so that Germany was impoverished but, crucially, was thereby less able to manufacture the machinery of war. Thus, the giant iron and steel works at Eupen and Malmedy were given to Belgium, the enormous Baltic port of Danzig (Gdansk) was made a free city and the Saar was mined vigorously by the French for all the time they had it.

Germany's armed forces were, moreover, reduced to levels so low that Germany was barely able to defend itself, and was certainly unable to attack its neighbours. The army was limited to 100,000, with conscription also forbidden. The navy was cut to 15,000 sailors and 36 ships, and the air force was scrapped completely.

### 3 Reparations

Finally, the reparations that Germany had to pay for reconstruction of war-damaged areas, such as French Flanders or Belgian Ypres, was set in 1921 at £66 billion (\$32 billion). Given the loss of territory and key economic assets, this was a sum that could not be raised and Germany defaulted in 1922 on just the second instalment.

## Questions

- Why were the terms of the Treaty of Versailles so resented by Germans when the terms of the treaties of St Germain with Austria, Trianon with Hungary, and Sevres with Turkey were also harsh?
- Study the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, then, within the context of the outbreak and events of the First World War, decide how far you believe them to be harsh or fair.



## Summary of the Treaty of Versailles

### Reparations

£66 billion (\$32 billion)

### Armed forces

100,000 soldiers (no conscription)

15,000 sailors, no U-boats (submarines) and a maximum of 36 ships

No air force

### Territory

Loss of Alsace-Lorraine to France (as well as the Saar, 1920–35)

Loss of Eupen and Malmedy to Belgium

Loss of northern Schleswig to Denmark

Loss of West Prussia, Posen and Thorn (the 'Polish Corridor') to Poland

Loss of Silesian land to Poland and Czechoslovakia

Loss of Danzig (to become a free city under the League of Nations)

Loss of all colonies to League of Nations mandates

treaty. Germany had no effective voice at the peace talks despite representation there, and no alternative to signing the treaty except a renewal of war — which would have been suicidal. Buried in the articles of the treaty, also, was the 'war guilt clause', blaming Germany alone for the war. Its supposed guilt for this was the justification for the punishing terms.

In calling for revenge, the headlines of *Deutsche Zeitung* were not unusual. Newspaper cartoons variously depicted Germany as a man facing execution (often by a French guillotine), a corpse being picked apart, or a maiden having her blood sucked by vampires. The message was clear: the Treaty of Versailles was Germany's death warrant. The culprits — the 'Big Three' (France, Britain and the USA) — were shown as diabolical or as evil, avenging angels.

Protests were held across Germany. In Berlin, civilian demonstrators gathered in front of the Reichstag to hear critical speeches and raise banners calling for 'Nur die vierzehn Punkte' ('Only the Fourteen Points'). Similarly big crowds took to the streets in Munich as ordinary Germans struggled to comprehend what had happened.

*diktat*: although Germany was represented at the treaty discussions, Germans felt the treaty's terms were dictated to them by France and Britain rather than negotiated between all parties present at Versailles.

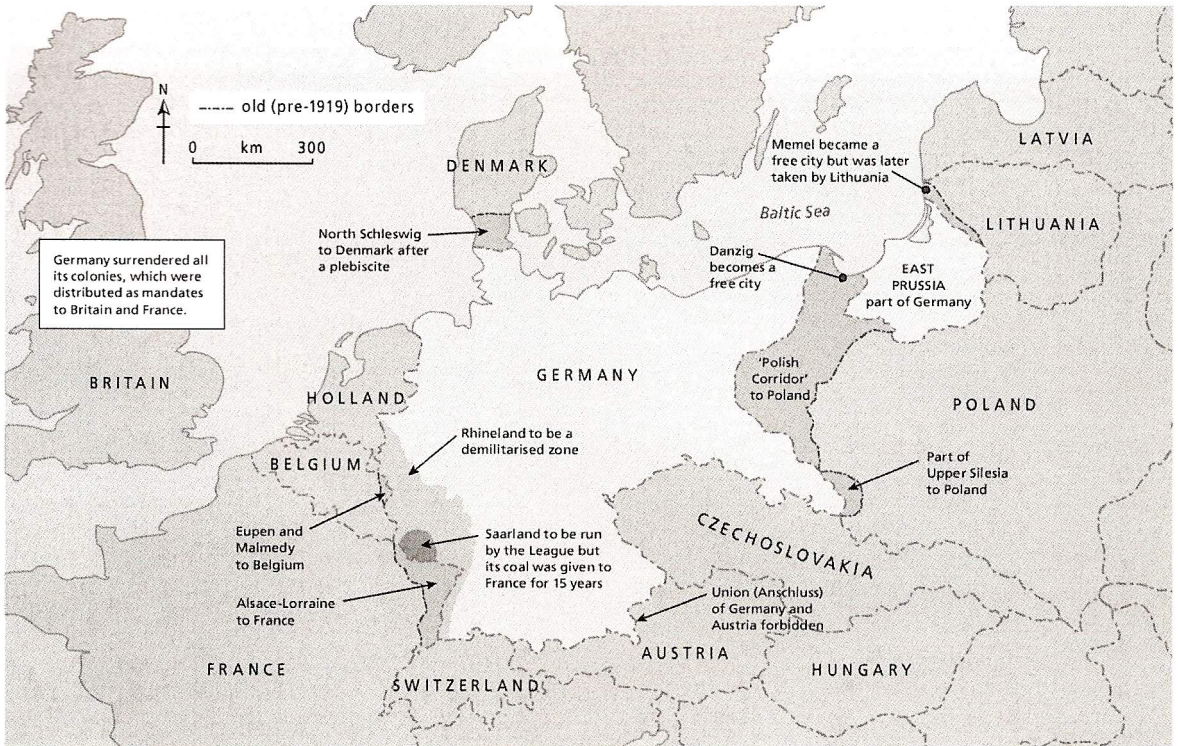
### The government's reaction

The new German government could only protest in formal, feeble ways. Its representatives at the actual signing of the treaty in the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles — Dr Müller and Dr Bell, the foreign and

### German reaction to the peace

What united the German nation was not only the severity of the treaty itself but resentment because the terms were a *diktat* rather than a negotiated peace

Figure 1 The territorial terms of the Treaty of Versailles





**Hans von Seeckt:** the German Imperial Army officer detailed to organise the new *Reichswehr* (German military) in accordance with the terms imposed by the Treaty of Versailles.

## Key points

- When the armistice was signed on 11 November 1918, Germany had not been invaded, it had not surrendered and it had only agreed to a cease-fire to end hostilities. But the situation in Germany was dire: civilians were nearly starving because of the British naval blockade.
- The treaty was seen as a *diktat* because Germany had no effective voice at the peace talks despite representation there, and no alternative to signing the treaty except a renewal of war.
- The circumstances and harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles meant that the German population was united in a sense of injustice and anger, and never really accepted the terms.
- US President Wilson's Fourteen Points were a set of proposals for peace, in which there was no mention of punishment. They were idealistically intended as the basis for a new world order creating lasting peace.
- France and Britain's motives were less idealistic. Clemenceau, in particular, was seeking retribution and restitution for the terms imposed on France following the Franco-Prussian War, whereas Britain sought to regain naval supremacy and get Germany out of Africa.
- Hindenburg and the army tried to salvage what they could of their reputations after the army's war failures, transferring blame to the new Weimar government by claiming that the army had been 'stabbed in the back' by it when the armistice was signed.

colonial secretaries respectively — looked 'isolated and pitiable', according to economist John Maynard Keynes, whose expert economic analysis concluded that Germany was being punished too harshly. The official statement from Weimar's Social Democrat government rejected the treaty outright and explained that its signing of the document was due to overwhelming pressure: there was no alternative.

### The armed forces' reaction

The armed forces were decisive in their opposition to the treaty. Naval officers sank 52 ships of the German High Seas fleet anchored at Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands a full week before the treaty was officially signed — in anticipation of harsh terms and to prevent the ships falling into British hands.

The army tried to salvage what it could of its reputation from the war, led in this by Hindenburg. He transferred blame for the army's war failures to the new Weimar government by claiming that the army had been 'stabbed in the back' by it when the armistice was signed. The Treaty of Versailles was consequent upon this. In the longer term, the army's reaction

## Web link

[www.tinyurl.com/27duyn](http://www.tinyurl.com/27duyn) is informative about all aspects of the Paris peace negotiations and settlements. [www.tinyurl.com/5vj1h9y](http://www.tinyurl.com/5vj1h9y) is also useful. [www.tinyurl.com/yokts2](http://www.tinyurl.com/yokts2) gives brief summaries of the Fourteen Points and the treaty terms, and would be a useful revision tool.

was to circumvent the treaty as far as possible. The 1920s saw its new leader, **Hans von Seeckt**, devise short-term training programmes to prepare more than 100,000 men for active service, as well as cooperate with the USSR for training tank crews and pilots.

The political reaction to the Treaty of Versailles was long-term hostility from the right wing and a lack of acceptance of it from the centre and left. While Weimar prospered in the mid-1920s, these feelings remained dormant. But Weimar was a fair-weather republic that faced implacable enemies because of its association with the treaty, and extreme parties such as the Nazis never forgave it.

## Conclusion

The circumstances and terms of the Treaty of Versailles meant that the German population was united as never before in a sense of injustice and anger. Their disbelief that the treaty could be so harsh, and their perception that it was a punishment rather than a fair end to hostilities, meant that Germans never really accepted it, whatever the new government was obliged to sign. The main target of the Germans' anger was, however, an old enemy — France. As the harshest of the 'Big Three', France was once again seen as the culprit and the target for most of the German wrath.

**Tim Chapman** teaches at Wisbech Grammar School in Cambridgeshire. He is the author of numerous articles, as well as *The Congress of Vienna* (1998), *Imperial Russia* (2001) and *The Italian Risorgimento* (2008).

## Further reading

Carr, W. (1991) *A History of Germany*, Arnold. This is still a dependable general text on the subject.

Henig, R. (1984) *Versailles and After, 1919–33*, Methuen. Provides a quick, short summary of the aftermath of the treaty.

More recent works following German history into the twentieth century include:

Fullbrook, M. and Williamson, D. (2008) *Democracy and Dictatorship in Germany 1919–63*, Heinemann.

Layton, G. (2009) *Democracy and Dictatorship in Germany 1919–63*, Hodder.

Worth reading for its pacey and controversial analysis is:

Taylor, A. J. P. (1946) *The Course of German History*, Hamish Hamilton.