

Ruth Henig

The Treaty of Versailles

80 Years On

'A complex interplay of forces'

Most historians who have written in the last 20 years about the Paris peace settlement and its aftermath no longer consider that the Treaty of Versailles itself contributed in any significant way to the outbreak of the Second World War. Their verdict is that the treaty terms, though punitive in tone, were actually framed in a very flexible way and were relatively lenient in effect, given the extensive damage, loss of life and widespread instability

caused by over 4 years of intensive fighting, not all of which had stopped by 1919. They argue that the peace, concluded with such great difficulty, was as reasonable as it could be, given the divergent national interests of the negotiators in Paris and the demands of Allied electorates that Germany should be presented in full with the bill for the war.

Historians no longer see the Paris Peace Conference as having been dominated by a battle for ascendancy between the idealistic US President Wilson and his Fourteen Points and the cynical, vengeful French leader Clemenceau trying to impose a distinctly un-Wilsonian punitive peace treaty on the German foe. Their painstaking research has revealed a much more complex interplay of forces, with all the major powers, including the United States delegation, intent on negotiating peace terms which would both protect their short-term national interests and prevent the outbreak of a similar war. The upshot was inevitably a compromise peace, about which all of the principal negotiators had some misgivings, and which still left Germany intact in the centre of Europe as a power of considerable territorial and industrial strength, albeit somewhat reduced in size and economic power.

As German leaders launched a series of bitter attacks on the treaty, many of their criticisms were echoed by British and American officials. They were dissatisfied with elements of the treaty, which they themselves had helped to draft. The result was that within a very few years the peace settlement, far from being enforced, was unravelling just as Germany was recovering its economic strength.

This was due not to the injustice of the terms themselves, but to the postwar context in which they were being applied. The First World War itself had bequeathed to Europe a host of financial, economic and political problems. No peace settlement concluded within months of its sudden end could possibly have succeeded in the three crucial areas of settling the most pressing issues arising out of the conflict, reconciling former enemies (especially Germany) to the settlement, and laying the foundations for a period of international stability.

plebiscite: referendum.

A plebiscite is a direct vote of all people in a state on a definite question, as an expression of the opinion of a whole nation.

Principal terms of the Treaty of Versailles

The Germans were to pay £6,600 million in reparations to the victors of the First World War.

The Anschluss (union) of Austria and Germany was prohibited.

War guilt was imposed on the Germans.

The German military was drastically reduced, i.e. the army was limited to 100,000 troops, the air force was abolished and the staffing and shipping strength of the navy was limited.

Substantial territorial losses included: German colonies, Alsace-Lorraine, Eupen-Malmédy, Memel, northern Schleswig, Poznan, Upper Silesia and East Prussia. Additionally, Danzig was to become a free city, controlled by the League of Nations, as was the Saar — but only for 15 years, pending a **plebiscite**, while France controlled the Saar coal-mines. The Rhineland was to be demilitarised and

on negotiating peace terms

If the two Allied leaders were persuaded to limit their objections to Wilson's Fourteen Points, his political opponents in the United States were not so amenable. Republicans and even some prominent Democrats did not support the President's peace programme, calling instead for a peace of retribution and for an armistice of 'unconditional surrender' with Germany. When, in the mid-term elections in November 1918, Wilson appealed to the American people to support his leadership and his programme they voted instead for a Republican-dominated Senate and Republican majority in the House of Representatives. This raised serious doubts as to whether any peace settlement based on Wilson's Fourteen Points would prove acceptable to the American Senate, which would have the responsibility of ratifying, amending or rejecting it.

This dramatic course of events was bound to increase the determination of Lloyd George and Clemenceau to push forward at Paris the vociferous demands of their own voters. The electorate wanted revenge and future security in the shape of the destruction of the German Navy, drastic reduction of the German Army, a Rhine frontier, and the full costs of the war. Yet despite strong oppo-

sition to Wilson's peace programme, his Fourteen Points did provide much of the framework for the ensuing peace settlement. The resulting Treaty of Versailles was much more principled than the harsh peace the Germans had imposed on Russia in the **Treaty of Brest-Litovsk** in March 1918, or on hapless Romania in the **Treaty of Bucharest**.

But the astute German leaders were not slow to turn Wilson's principles and his new diplomacy against the Allies. They interpreted his peace programme in the widest possible way, to argue that self-determination therefore called for plebiscites in Alsace, Lorraine and on the German-Polish border, and that German Austrians should, if they wished, be allowed to unite with Germany.

German negotiators, waiting to be summoned to Paris to enter into peace discussions, had convinced themselves that the United States and the Allied powers needed German cooperation in the fight against Bolshevism and in the economic reconstruction of Russia. Thus the peace would be relatively

armistice: a truce, a stopping of fighting for a specified time during war.

Treaty of Brest-Litovsk:

3 March 1918, by the terms of which Russia gave up the Ukraine, the Baltic provinces, Finland, the Caucasus, Poland and White Russia. The 1918 German armistice in the west invalidated Brest-Litovsk.

Treaty of Bucharest:

5 March 1918, when the Germans forced the Romanians to make a separate peace. On 9 November 1918, 2 days before the Armistice, Romania declared war on Germany again, thus ensuring a place at the Paris Peace Conference.

'The Allies are burying Germany with the Versailles terms': a German cartoon from August 1919.

resentful and protesting Germany. As a consequence war came again, as the eminent British diplomat Vansittart observed, not because the treaty was severe but because it was broken.

Historians today are writing with the benefit of over 80 years of hindsight and a wealth of archival material amassed from all the belligerent countries. Thus it is much easier for them to identify the major problems facing Allied leaders in 1919 than it was for contemporaries either to recognise or to resolve them. I would like to explain why it was that the Allies, having narrowly won the war, came to lose the peace, and why popular views about the peace treaty are now regarded by historians as being so wide of the mark.

The Fourteen Points as a basis for the settlement

The Fourteen Points and associated speeches represented Woodrow Wilson's bid to seize the initiative on behalf of the United States and offer moral leadership to the world in the peace negotiations. The US President did not consult with his European allies before entering into negotiations with the Germans about an **armistice** based on the Fourteen Points. Such tactics did not augur well for a peace process, which would inevitably involve complex political and territorial negotiations involving many countries. Wilson's adviser, Colonel House, assured British Prime Minister Lloyd George and Clemenceau in October 1918, in a bid to soothe their understandably ruffled feathers, that it was possible to 'establish almost any point that anyone wished against Germany' from Wilson's peace programme and speeches.

President Wilson's Fourteen Points of 8 January 1918

- 1 Renunciation of secret diplomacy
- 2 Freedom of the seas
- 3 Removal of economic barriers where possible
- 4 Reduction in armaments
- 5 Impartial adjustment of colonial claims
- 6 Evacuation of Russian territory
- 7 Restoration of Belgium
- 8 Liberation of occupied France and the return to France of Alsace-Lorraine
- 9 Readjustment of the Italian frontiers to conform to the lines of nationality
- 10 Autonomous development of Austro-Hungarian nationalities
- 11 Evacuation of occupation forces from Serbia, Montenegro and Romania, plus Serbian access to the sea
- 12 Free passage of the Dardanelles and autonomous development for the Ottoman empire's non-Turkish peoples
- 13 An independent Poland to be formed, with access to the sea
- 14 A guarantee of the political independence of states by forming a general association of nations (the embryonic idea of the League of Nations)

? What problems arose from using Wilson's Fourteen Points as a basis for an armistice?

Chronology

1918

January	Wilson's 'Fourteen Points' speech
March	Treaty of Brest-Litovsk between Germany and Russia
October	Germans seek armistice based on Fourteen Points
November	US mid-term election; Republican majority in Congress Armistice signed between Allies and Germany
December	Lloyd George victory in British election

1919

January	Paris Peace Conference begins
June	Germans sign Treaty of Versailles

1920

January	Treaty of Versailles and League of Nations come into effect
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lenient. But if it turned out to be tougher than they were anticipating, then the German nation would invoke the new Wilsonian spirit and appeal to progressive forces throughout the world to protest against such a harsh capitalist peace. So even before they saw the draft Treaty of Versailles, German leaders had shaped a strategy which, if necessary, would use Wilsonian idealism and political principles to discredit the peace settlement.

The German response to defeat

The greatest problem facing the peacemakers in 1919 was the deep gulf of comprehension

between themselves and the Germans. The Allies constructed the peace settlement on the assumption that, while the Germans would not like many of the terms, they would accept them with a reasonable grace as the consequence of defeat. They thought the Germans would cooperate in carrying out the terms, just as the French had done in the 1870s after the Franco-Prussian War. Lloyd George genuinely believed, or perhaps fervently hoped, that Germany would cooperate in its own containment and would be willing to play a constructive role in postwar Europe. But in this expectation he could not have been more wrong.

In the first place many Germans did not believe that their country had been honourably defeated on the battlefield. Instead the efforts of the valiant German troops had been sabotaged by traitors and pacifists in Germany who had spread disaffection and revolution. This had prevented the soldiers on the Western Front from winning the famous victory which was almost in their grasp.

Though it was the German High Command that decided to request peace, the actual negotiations were carried forward by civilian leaders. The German Army was not forced to march into captivity and Germany was not invaded by Allied troops. Instead the army returned home as an intact fighting force, its soldiers greeted in Berlin by new President Ebert as valiant heroes who 'return unvanquished from the field of battle'. Thus, as historian Sally Marks has pointed out, the Allies failed 'to bring defeat home to the German people or to prepare them for the consequences of defeat'.

Believing that, at the worst, they had fought to an honourable draw on the Western Front, while being totally victorious in the East, German leaders now waited to be summoned to Paris to assist the Allies in a crusade against Bolshevism and in the economic reconstruction of Russia. Instead they were summoned to be presented with a treaty far harder than they were hoping for, particularly in the Eastern settlement, which branded the German nation as the aggressor. This was a verdict that the Germans indignantly rejected, arguing that they had been provoked into war in 1914 by the encirclement policies of Russia and France. They claimed that they had fought not an aggressive war, but a just and defensive war against despotic tsarism.

At this point in summer 1919 a huge tidal wave of protest against the treaty swept through Germany, as pent-up emotional nationalism, which had been accumulating for a long time, was finally released. Politicians from all parties could agree on one thing at least: that the treaty was vindictive, unfair and impossible to execute. Any voices of moderation or of dissent were drowned out by fierce patriots on the right declaring that they would fight on rather than accept such a dishon-

PETER REWMARK

The Big Four at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919.
Left to right: Orlando (Italy), Lloyd George, Clemenceau and Wilson.

Key points

- ✦ Over 80 years of hindsight, plus access to abundant archival resources, make it easier to form a rational judgement of the Treaty of Versailles.
- ✦ It was impossible at the end of a gruelling 4-year war to settle issues arising from the conflict, to reconcile former enemies and also to create the foundations for future international stability.
- ✦ The Treaty of Versailles was a compromise peace: all participants sought to negotiate terms that would protect their short-term national interests and prevent another war.
- ✦ The Germans had resented shouldering the blame for instigating the war.
- ✦ The Germans had expected to join the Western allies in combating Bolshevism.
- ✦ The Second World War did not arise because the Versailles Treaty terms were severe, but because they were not consistently

ourable peace, and those on the left denouncing the treaty as an imperialist peace.

Thus the German response to the peace settlement crystallised into a twin strategy of appealing to left-wing and progressive forces across Europe for support in their attempts to seek revision of the unjust 'capitalist' peace, while playing the nationalist right at home in refusing, as far as possible, to cooperate in carrying it out.

This German strategy, and the ceaseless propaganda which accompanied it, proved to be extremely successful. Britain and France were forced into progressive revisions of the treaty, while Germany evaded the execution of the reparations and disarmament clauses. American capital flowed into Germany after 1923–24 and enabled the Weimar Republic to stage a significant economic recovery, laying the foundations for the renewed military challenge of the 1930s.

Conclusion

It was not possible to frame a peace settlement at the end of the Great War which would both satisfy the demands of the French and British people for a punitive treaty and fit German conceptions of a fair peace. After 4 months of tortuous and complex negotiations at Paris between Lloyd George, Clemenceau, Wilson and the Italian premier Orlando, a compromise settlement was reached only with the greatest difficulty, and it left delegates from all countries dissatisfied with some aspects.

In such a situation the German strategy of denouncing the treaty and appealing to radical and

German troops returning home after the end of the First World War.

progressive opinion across Europe and in the United States to bring about its revision paid handsome dividends. Within a year the victorious coalition that had defeated Germany and negotiated the peace had become fatally divided as the United States Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles and signed a separate peace with Germany, leaving Britain and France bitterly opposed as to whether the treaty should be enforced or revised. It was the total failure of the three powers to work closely together after 1919 that was one of the contributing factors to the outbreak of a second world war 20 years later.

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Further study

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❓ For what reasons did the Germans find the terms of the Treaty of Versailles unacceptable?

❓ To what extent was the Treaty of Versailles 'doomed to failure from the start'?