

The Treaty of Versailles:

Was It A Fair Peace for a New World Order or Prelude to Disaster?

Unlike earlier peace treaties, which were the product of cultivated diplomacy of the existing aristocracy, the Treaty of Versailles was a dictated instrument that placed the full burden of World War I entirely on the Germans. It was one of five separate treaties signed as a result of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, where 27 nations met to settle World War 1 or the Great War, as it was known. Each separate treaty was named after the Paris suburb where it was signed:

St. Germain with Austria,

Trianon with Hungary,

Neuilly with Bulgaria,

Sevres with Turkey, and

Versailles with Germany.

Representatives of the four major Allied Powers at war's end – Great Britain (David Lloyd George), France (Georges Clemenceau), Italy (Vittorio Orlando) and the United States (Woodrow Wilson) – made the decisions that would become this treaty. Also, as the war drew to a close, it was disclosed that many nations had made secret treaties regarding the defeated nations' territory and possessions.

The harshness of this treaty imposed on a defeated German nation a historical burden that was not supportable by events that had led to the war in 1914. The previous great treaties, from the time of Westphalia (1648) had been arranged by noble statesmen in the service of a monarch and had made no attempt to respond to the desires of the masses, those who served and suffered most during war. This treaty, on the other hand, was the work of statesmen who were responsible to their people and could not afford to behave or negotiate in the cavalier fashion of their diplomatic ancestors. Not only was Germany excluded from the negotiating table, but so, too, were representatives of the Russian government. In the aftermath of a long war that had cost millions of lives – both civilian and military, destroyed Belgium and other areas, introduced horror beyond measure and nearly bankrupted both the British and the French (due to huge levels of war debt). Many demanded a settlement that would bring lasting peace, permanently remove the enemy, create a more egalitarian world and provide for long term global security.

The issues facing the nations of Europe and the negotiators included the need to re-establish working governments, assigning blame to establish reparations responsibility, dealing with a new communist government in Russia, rebuilding damaged Europe with a smaller labor pool due to the large loss of life, growing nationalism of previously oppressed peoples, possible territorial changes inside and outside of Europe, requested freedom of colonial peoples, unprecedented war debts, arms reduction, and providing a forum for future negotiations.

Below are paraphrases, not necessarily in order of importance, of the main agenda demands of the main 'players':

United States as represented by Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points:

1. No secret treaties, open diplomacy between nations
2. Freedom of the seas unless closed by international agreement
3. Free and equal international trade without barriers between friendly states
4. Arms reductions, only maintained for domestic safety
5. Self-determination of colonial peoples
6. Recognition of Russia and inclusion into the international community
7. Restoration of Belgium as a free and independent nation
8. Restoration of conquered territory to France, including the Alsace-Lorraine
9. Readjusting Italy's borders to include Italian peoples of neighboring lands
10. Self-determination for people groups and nations within Austria-Hungary
11. Self-determination in the Balkans, Serbia to get sea access
12. Turkish sovereignty, self-determination of peoples and nations within the old Ottoman Empire, and freedom of the seas in the Dardanelles
13. Creation of an independent Poland, with access to the sea, whose existence is guaranteed by international community
14. Creation of an international association of nations to help ensure political independence and territorial integrity of all established nations and peoples

France:

1. Reduce German lands so they are no longer a threat to France
2. Create a new independent and de-militarized nation west of the Rhine River
3. Germany must pay ALL war damages, war costs and pensions for soldiers
4. Germany must be disarmed – 100,000 volunteer soldiers for defense only and no aircraft, heavy artillery or submarines
5. Germany must admit total responsibility for the war and its collective guilt
6. German & Turkish colonies must be given to Great Britain and France

Great Britain:

1. The Alsace-Lorraine should be returned to France (it lost it in 1871)
2. France should get the German Saarland's coalfields until 1935
3. The Allies will occupy the Rhineland for 15 years
4. There should be new nations created in eastern Europe to act as a buffer against communist Russia
5. Germany must pay ALL war damages, war costs and pensions for soldiers
6. Germany should be allowed a small army to protect western Europe from Russian communism
7. Germany must admit its guilt for the war and its total responsibility
8. German & Turkish colonies must be given to Great Britain and France
9. Great Britain, as the largest sea power, should continue to control the seas

Italy:

1. Some of the German and Turkish colonies should be given to Italy
2. Parts of the Austrian Empire bordering the Adriatic Sea should be given to Italy