

D: The Weimar Republic

D.1. The Treaty of Versailles

Versailles and German expectations:

The Treaty of Versailles is one of the most controversial international agreements. Many observers -- politicians and historians -- have tended to blame the rise of the Nazis on Versailles, following the dictum of an eminent democratic German politician. When asked about the ultimate reasons for the failure of the democratic Weimar Republic, he replied: "Versailles and Moscow." By "Moscow" he meant that subversive communist activity guided by the Russian Bolshevik government had undermined democracy in tandem with the Nazis. By mentioning "Versailles" he claimed that the peace treaty had had detrimental effects on the viability and domestic authority of the German democracy.

The French, on the other side, felt disappointed by the treaty. They had hoped to weaken Germany more, maybe to dissolve it. To them, the treaty did not seem harsh enough.

In general, it has seemed that the treaty was either too harsh or too mild. It was too harsh to reconcile Germany with its former war enemies and to integrate it into a lasting peaceful postwar order, and it was too mild to weaken Germany so as to make it impossible for it to ever again become a great power. The picture that emerges today after more intensive research is more complex and differentiated than that, but Versailles nevertheless remains both a highly ambivalent and crucial station in German history. The actual peace terms harshly disappointed the Germans, who felt that they radically contradicted the promises Wilson had made to the prerevolutionary German governments. The Germans, for right or wrong, felt betrayed by Wilson and the United States.

If we compare German expectations and the terms of Versailles, we cannot overlook sharp discrepancies. Instead of a negotiated peace in which Germany would be a significant, if not equal, partner, the treaty gave practically no room for German input and resembled more a dictate than a real peace settlement. Instead of admitting the new democratic Germany into the community of democratic nations, the Allies ostracized the vanquished nation. They even took pains to humiliate its national consciousness. Germany was -- for the time being -- not allowed to join the newly founded **League of Nations** and remained a pariah in the postwar order. Instead of a peace of reconciliation the Germans received a peace of submission and punishment. The principle of **national self-determination**, instead of being respected as a general rule, was always applied if it weakened Germany and its former allies but never where it would have benefited them.

Wilsonian ideology seemed to have covered traditional ruthless power politics with a moralistic glaze. How did this momentous discrepancy come about? Were the Germans really betrayed? Should they ever have believed in a milder peace settlement?

Wilson's Fourteen Points:

Let us now see how this misunderstanding came about. On 8 January 1918 Wilson offered Congress an outline for a moderate peace in Europe. He was prompted to do so by the critical condition of the Entente after the Russian defeat. In France and Britain war-weariness became stronger, and it seemed irresponsible to many political minds that war should be continued for aggressive French and British war aims. Wilson thus hoped to placate moderate opinion in the Entente and at the same time suggest to the Germans that they could expect a peace settlement that would not destroy their state but give them a chance to survive as a major nation.

The principles Wilson articulated in his Fourteen Points were above all: economic and political equality of all nations (against satellite states, as in German-dominated Eastern Europe, and for the restoration of Belgian independence). Wilson further demanded that Europe be reorganized along lines of nationality. This idea implied the German loss of Alsace-Lorraine and the creation of a truly independent Polish state that would have to receive access to the Baltic Sea at the expense of some German territory. Concerning war reparations, Wilson asked that they be limited to repairing the damage done by invading troops (Germans in Belgium and France).

Further, Wilson encouraged democratization. He announced that the Allies would speak seriously only to "true" representatives of the German people. (He sometimes doubted, however, that the German democrats would really be the true representatives of the German people; the Kaiser's generals seemed to be quite popular.) But Wilson made it clear that Germany would be allowed to gain a place in a new, liberal world order if it was willing to respect his principles and to forego its own expansionist or hegemonial aims. The restoration of Belgium was a "must" on the American list; Alsace-Lorraine and the Polish corridor were merely conditions that "should" be met.

It was on the basis of these fourteen points that the German government had asked to open negotiations for a truce in October 1918. Wilson's answers had generally confirmed the fourteen points but put heavier emphasis on Alsace-Lorraine and the Polish corridor. One factor the Germans tended to ignore, however, was the persistence of French and British war aims. Wilson was maybe the strongest member of the Entente, but the French had more of a stake in Europe than the United States. Georges **Clémenceau**, the French prime minister, did not take Wilson's claims seriously. He joked that the Good Lord had managed with ten commandments, whereas Wilson needed fourteen points.

Particularly in the light of French and British expectations the German hopes for a mild peace were downright naive and betrayed a high degree of wishful thinking born of the desperation typical for the end of the war. A coalition war had ended; this meant that many different countries would voice their claims. Wilson could not conclude peace all alone. Moreover, the passions aroused by a world war, particularly in France and Britain, could not easily be transformed into feelings of reconciliation.

The peace conference:

On 18 January 1919 the leading statesmen of the victorious nations met in Paris to decide about the future of the defeated Central Powers. The choice of the opening date was a deliberate humiliation of Germany, since it was the birthday of the German Empire in 1871. Negotiations were conducted mainly between the heads of state of the United States, France, Britain, and Italy, the so-called "**big four**." They had widely differing goals.

For Wilson, the most important goal was the establishment of a League of Nations that would mediate all future conflicts between nations and make war as a means of politics unnecessary. Wilson was prompted by fears of Bolshevism. He wanted to offer a pacifist vision to war-weary Europeans, mainly the workers and the leftists. He envisioned a liberal union of free, democratic nations, based on the principle of national self-determination, as a competing model to Lenin's call for a brotherhood of socialist societies according to Marxist ideas. Wilson wanted to weaken Germany's military potential for all times, but he had nothing against a democratic Germany becoming a major economic power again and felt strongly about leaving it unified. He feared that an all too weak Germany might inspire France to strive for domination on the European continent.

To the French, security against a future German invasion mattered most. France wanted to change the balance of power by weakening Germany's economic and demographic potential to a point that would make it impossible for Germany to overpower France. In 1914 Germany had had about twenty-five million inhabitants more than France, and German industrial production had been much more intensive than France's. In order to reduce German superiority, to reconstruct the destroyed areas, and to cover their own war debt, the French wanted high reparations.

But reparations were not sufficient, since they could only temporarily bind the German economy. The French hoped further to control Germany's western industrial heartlands and -- maybe -- to dissolve the Reich altogether. They wanted to separate the Rhineland and the Ruhr from Germany and to create a semi-autonomous state leaning toward France. Without its densely populated and highly industrialized West, Germany would find it impossible to threaten France again. As an additional safeguard against future German aggression, France hoped to build up an alliance network among the newly independent nationalities of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Poland, the so-called **cordon sanitaire**. This alliance was supposed to threaten Germany with a second front again, after France's main prewar ally in Eastern Europe, the Russian Empire, had broken down. France further wanted to secure a strong position in the Middle East in territories formerly belonging to the Ottoman Empire.

The British wanted above all to demilitarize Germany and to get hold of its battle fleet and merchant navy. They claimed their share in German reparations and demanded domination over most of Germany's African colonies. In addition to that, their interests concentrated on the Middle East (at the expense of the dissolved Ottoman Empire). Often British interests in this region contradicted ambitious French schemes. In general, the British aims were compatible with the American aims. The British believed that Germany should after a while recover as a major trade partner without ever again posing a military threat. Like the United States, Britain was also unhappy about the prospect of French predominance on the European Continent.

Italy joined the conference tables at Versailles to claim the lands it had been promised as a price for supporting the Entente, the South Tyrol (partly German-speaking Alpine valley) and the Trentino (border area with Yugoslavia; today: Slovenia). Japan merely wanted its conquest of Germany's Chinese colony ratified. In mostly secret negotiations over four months the leading statesmen drafted a treaty that they submitted to the German government in early May 1919.

The main conditions of the treaty included territorial, military, financial, and judicial elements. (For a full text of the treaty, see [Eurodocs, World War I Archive: Versailles.](#))

1) Territorial: Germany had to cede Alsace-Lorraine to France and accept an allied occupation of most of its western provinces. The **Saar** area was given to France for fifteen years. Thereafter a plebiscite should decide its future. The rich coal mines in the Saar district, however, would belong to France, and Germany would have to buy them back if the plebiscite yielded a pro-German majority. The **Rhineland** and some cities on the right bank of the Rhine were occupied by French, English, American, and Belgian troops for five, ten, or fifteen years respectively. A small border area was annexed by Belgium.

In the north a plebiscite was held to decide the fate of northern **Schleswig**, the province with a Danish minority. The result split the province into a pro-Danish and pro-German part. In the east, Germany had to give the provinces of Western Prussia and Posen to Poland, thus offering the landlocked Polish state an outlet to the Baltic Sea. Some of Upper Silesia also went to Poland, but some areas were given the right to a plebiscite (the drawing of voting districts was arbitrary, however, giving the Poles a majority wherever possible).

The city **Danzig** on the Baltic Sea became a so-called free city under the mandate of the League of Nations. A small area in Silesia was given to Czechoslovakia and another strip of land in the north of East Prussia was put under Allied administration and was later seized by Lithuania. The loss of the territories in the east filled most Germans with even more indignation than the loss of the western lands, since the changes in the east often contradicted the principle of national self-determination: Some of the new Polish territories were settled predominantly by Germans, and Danzig was a German city.

A union of German Austria with Germany, although the declared wish of both peoples, was forbidden, and several million Germans living in Bohemia (in the **Sudetenland**) came under Czech rule, which most of them resented. (Oskar Schindler, by the way, belonged to this German minority in Czechoslovakia.)

2) Military: Germany had to disarm almost completely and was only allowed an army of 100.000 men. Germany had to demilitarize a 50-kilometer zone on the right bank of the Rhine and was forbidden to own military airplanes, submarines, tanks, heavy artillery, and poison gas. The navy was limited to a few small ships. The existing German battle fleet would have to be given to Britain along with all merchant ships (the British got the merchant ships, but Tirpitz's "proud" battle fleet scuttled itself in June 1919). An **Inter-Allied Military Control Commission** (IMCC) was granted large powers to supervise and control German disarmament. Germany was to be disarmed and left only with minor armed forces that could be used to repress domestic unrest but were inferior in combat even to the Polish army. The Treaty of Versailles stated, however, that German disarmament should precede disarmament all over the world. But the victors of the world war, of course, were in no hurry to disarm themselves.

3) Financial: The Entente, and the French, in particular, had always claimed that the Germans would have to pay not only for the damage done in the occupied regions but also for most of the Entente's war expenses. To justify such an enormous claim the Entente argued that Germany and its allies had started the war and were thus responsible for all of their enemies' costs and damages. The sum of reparations and the modes of payment were not specified initially since the Entente powers could not agree on how much Germany could pay and on the

way they wanted to divide reparations among themselves. Germany thus had to sign a blank check and expect an astronomic sum to be paid over many decades.

4) Judicial: The Entente claimed that the German leaders had conducted the war partly in a criminal way, mainly by opting for submarine warfare. The Kaiser, who was deemed responsible for this, and about two thousand German top officers and officials including Tirpitz, Hindenburg, and Ludendorff were to be put on trial by the Entente.

These were the conditions of the treaty. The German government was not given a chance to change it substantially, and the Entente threatened to advance further onto German territory if it refused. The French actually hoped for a German refusal because that would give their army the opportunity to dissolve Germany and to take more direct control than the treaty allowed. The Germans, government and people, were horrified when they were informed about the peace terms. Not even the worst pessimists had expected that the treaty would be so harsh. A tremendous uproar occurred, but it seemed impossible to resist. Two German governments stepped down because they did not want to take responsibility for signing the treaty, but finally there was no choice but to sign.

The Germans were most infuriated at the claim that they had started the war and therefore should pay for everything. That the Entente had failed to define an absolute sum of reparations and that the criteria for what Germany should pay for were very expansive deeply worried the Germans. They had no guarantee that the other nations would disarm, too, and thus it seemed as if the Germans would be held in eternal financial and military bondage. Germans, moreover, were incensed about the prospect that their war heroes should be put on trial. The loss of territories with a large German population in the east also incensed public opinion. Many people, particularly on the right, advocated a desperate act of resistance even at the price of complete foreign occupation, hoping that foreign occupation would -- just as under Napoleon I -- produce a united German uprising. The majority in the Reichstag, however, resisted this fanciful alternative. But even if many Germans felt that they had no alternative to signing, there was almost universal consensus that the treaty was extremely unjust and needed to be changed at the first opportunity.

Evaluation:

While the Germans were bitterly disappointed about what they saw as Wilson's "betrayal," the Treaty of Versailles was a compromise between Wilsonian aims and French plans. In the short run, the treaty significantly weakened Germany and gave the victors economic benefits and much power mainly in the west of the country. In the long run, however, nothing spoke against a German recovery at least in economics. The trade conditions favoring the victors would elapse after five years, the occupation would have to be ended after fifteen years, and German disarmament, at least according to the letter of the treaty, was ultimately conditional upon general, world-wide disarmament.

The treaty weakened Germany more than Wilson had wanted, but the American president had been forced to negotiate in a position of weakness and to make far-reaching concessions to his allies in order to secure a peace treaty at all. He tried to conceal his failure to the American public by condoning the peace treaty as a just punishment for a bad criminal. To this purpose he dropped the distinction between Germany's prerevolutionary and republican governments. Wilson first of all wanted to make sure that Germany would not succumb to Bolshevism; in the long run, he wished for an integration of republican Germany into a liberal community of nations. Germany could become a major economic power again, but not a military power.

The fourteen points and Wilson's assurances in October 1918 had suggested a milder peace than Versailles, but the biggest problem was that the Germans still refused to acknowledge that they had lost a world war, a war that had unbound unprecedented energies and emotions and affected societies as a whole, a war, for whose outbreak the German government had to bear a large share of responsibility. The traumatic character of the defeat gave rise to illusions. Germans believed that they had been tricked into disarming themselves by the alleged promise of a "just" peace by the American President. As if there had been no military defeat before! It remained extremely difficult to understand for Germans how they could have lost the war without losing a decisive battle and without letting the enemy conquer German territory. That their war machine had simply run out of men and materiel and that this was decisive in a modern war was hard to understand.

This trauma, this difficulty to understand how things had turned from seemingly imminent victory to disaster, made many Germans susceptible to poisonous, distorting legends. The worst of all was the stab-in-the-back legend, propagated by Hindenburg and Ludendorff in November 1919. The dismissed generals claimed that the defeat had come about as a result of democratic and socialist strivings at home. Politicians eager for reform or revolution had, according to the generals, stabbed the undefeated German army in the back by launching a revolution at home. Already before November 1918, they claimed, the democrats had undermined the war effort by diverting popular attention from ultimate support for the war to concern about domestic gains. In other words: the Socialists and Democrats, those who represented the new Weimar system, were responsible for the German defeat.

This was a perfidious lie, as the revolution was triggered by the defeat, not vice versa. All of Germany's allies in South Eastern Europe had broken down in October 1918, the western front was about to crumble due to the vast superiority of the Entente forces. Even if the Germans had held out for a while in Belgium they would have been attacked in the southeast, where after the Austro-Hungarian defeat Allied troops in Greece and Italy faced no enemy any more. In any case, the ultimate breakdown of the German army was only a matter of time, as Ludendorff himself had admitted before the revolution.

In the light of the German conditions imposed on defeated Russia at Brest-Litovsk, moreover, the Treaty of Versailles did not look extremely harsh. (To check this out, see [Eurodocs, World War I Archive: Brest-Litovsk.](#)) But, as mentioned above, Versailles was a problematic result of a compromise. Germany was not weakened enough to make it impossible for it to ever rise again as a military threat. Its structural potential for hegemony (economy, population, education) was not destroyed.

On the other side, the treaty was sure to make a significant section of the German public unforgiving and eager for a revanche. In that sense it was not a "peace treaty" but, as the German writer Bertolt Brecht once said, a truce in a European thirty-years civil war. The discourse over Versailles helped poison political life of the Weimar Republic, as the extremely difficult adjustment period following the war was blamed not primarily on the war itself (as it should have been) but on Versailles and Weimar Germany's compliance with the peace treaty. Given the high and expansive German expectations of the war years, however, it is hard to think of a peace that would have pleased the Germans.

The dilemma for the United States was that the milder the peace the greater the American role as a future interventionist power in Europe: Germany, fighting a world coalition while having only weak allies, had been overcome only through American help. A Germany left largely intact could again become a military threat, so that once again the United States would have to intervene to decide a war in Europe for the Entente. On the other side, an all too weak Germany could easily become the prey of a France wanting to establish its own predominance over Europe. France could attack Germany before it recovered and impose its own peace on Germany. American assistance would then be needed to save Germany from France. The problem was that the United States was not prepared to assume the new responsibilities it faced as a world power. As the main creditor of the Entente, it had a only a short-term interest in European stability and in French and British wealth.

Altogether, we have to consider that statesmen at Versailles had little latitude. The global war had created circumstances that even good will could not easily have changed. Recent historiography has slightly rehabilitated Wilson. He made sure that at least some compromise between his ideological goals and the more aggressive aims of the French came about. The Paris peace conference had a multitude of problems to solve: Germany was only one part of them. In the following months the Entente concluded separate treaties with Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey (see [Eurodocs, World War I Archive: Conventions and Treaties](#)). Versailles undoubtedly helped to compromise the new German democracy, but the reasons for its failure were more complex than the Versailles trauma. The compromise character of the peace treaty left Germany some hope for revision and ultimate repudiation. There was no need to accept a total defeat as there would be in 1945. Revision remained a distant but viable goal. Germans were determined to work for it.

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