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Versailles and Peacemaking

By Dr Ruth Henig

Last updated 2011-03-10



'Should the Treaty of Versailles punish or rehabilitate Germany?' Dr Ruth Henig examines the question that divided the Allies at the end of World War One.

The American liberal peace programme

The peace settlement was drawn up at the end of a long and gruelling war which cost over eight million lives and, according to one estimate, around 260 billion dollars - or to put it another way, over six times the sum of all the national debt accumulated in the entire world from the end of the 18th century to 1914.

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The expectation of both the Allies and the Central Powers was that the costs of the war would largely be recouped from the losers. Furthermore, both sides planned to exploit their victory by inflicting territorial losses and military limitations on the enemy, and confiscating a sizeable chunk of their economic and industrial resources.



Wilson: progressive liberal? ©

However, such ambitions did not accord well with the peace programme being drawn up in the United States in the course of 1918. The **Fourteen Points**, delivered by the President of the United States to the American congress in January 1918, and his subsequent addresses represented an ambitious and idealistic bid by Woodrow Wilson to seize the initiative on behalf of the United States and to offer moral leadership to the world in the ensuing peace negotiations.

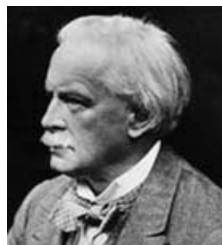
When press reports about Wilson's Fourteen Points first reached Germany, the American peace programme was indignantly dismissed by conservatives as being a 'front for imperialistic conquest' and striking a note of victory which was 'hardly appropriate to Germany's unprecedentedly promising military situation' in early 1918. In stark contrast to Wilson's peace proposals, the Germans concluded an extremely harsh treaty with Russia at Brest Litovsk in March 1918, and

turned their attention to a final, all-out push to break the Allied lines on the Western Front.

But victory did not materialise. Instead, by August of 1918 the German High Command were facing defeat. Now Wilson's peace proposals looked very attractive, compared to the terms likely to be put forward by French or British leaders. The High Command hastily summoned political leaders from the German Reichstag to put their weight behind a new civilian government under Prince Max von Baden, and to agree to pursue peace negotiations with Wilson based on the Fourteen Points. The cynical calculation was that a new civilian government would secure a more lenient peace than would be offered to German military leaders.

Challenges to Wilson

While Wilson negotiated the terms of a ceasefire with German representatives, the Allied powers were left waiting on the sidelines. Wilson's reluctance at this stage to consult with British and French leaders did not augur well for a peace process which would inevitably involve complex political and territorial negotiations involving many countries. Nor was he willing to compromise with his critics in the United States.



Lloyd George won a landslide victory with his bid to make the Germans 'pay' ©

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There were many Republicans and even some prominent Democrats who did not support Wilson's liberal peace programme, calling instead for a peace of retribution and for an armistice with Germany of 'unconditional surrender'.

In the American mid-term elections held in November 1918, the American people voted not for Wilson and his peace programme but for his Republican opponents, resulting in a Republican-dominated Senate and a Republican majority in the House of Representatives.

Thus serious doubts were raised even before the armistice had been signed, and weeks before a peace conference could convene, as to whether any peace settlement based on Wilson's Fourteen Points would be ratified by the American Senate.

This serious challenge to Wilson within the United States increased the determination of the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, and the French Premier, Clemenceau, to push forward the demands of their own electorates. Lloyd George won a crushing election victory in Britain in December, 1918, under the

banner of 'making the Germans pay'. French opinion was even more vociferous in calling for security against future German aggression and for reparations for all the damage caused by the Germans in northern France.

The Great War came to an end on 11 November 1918, the date when the Germans signed an armistice and agreed to peace negotiations on the basis of the Fourteen Points. Their interpretation of these points was extremely broad, encompassing plebiscites in Alsace and Lorraine and on the German-Polish border to reflect Wilson's call for self-determination, and arguing that German Austrians, if they wished, should be allowed to unite with Germany.

German officials were not slow to recognise that Wilson's principles and 'new diplomacy' could be turned to Germany's advantage, and used to justify territorial gains in Europe, even in the face of military defeat.

Negotiations begin

The scene was thus set for gruelling peace negotiations, which began in Paris in early January 1919. The leaders of 32 countries, representing between them some three-quarters of the world's population, together with large numbers of advisers and scores of journalists descended on the French capital. Passions ran high and it took time to impose order on the proceedings.



The Big Four, from left: Lloyd George, Orlando, Clemenceau and Wilson ©

...after weeks of tortuous negotiations, a peace was finally hammered out and presented to the Germans...

Discussions about possible peace terms were repeatedly interrupted by urgent political and military crises revolving around the renewal of the armistice with Germany, the threat of the spread of Bolshevism and continuing fighting in eastern Europe. There was an assassination attempt on the French premier, Clemenceau.

Both Lloyd George and Wilson had to return home part-way through the conference to attend to urgent parliamentary business. Orlando of Italy stormed out in late April. But after weeks of tortuous negotiations, a peace was finally hammered out and presented to the Germans on 7 May.

Compared to the treaties which Germany had imposed on defeated Russia and Romania in 1918, the Treaty of Versailles was quite moderate. It stripped Germany of just over 13 per cent of its territory, much of which, in the shape of Alsace and Lorraine, was returned to France. It also reduced Germany's economic productivity by about 13 per cent and its population by ten per cent. Germany lost all of its colonies and large merchant vessels, 75 per cent of its iron ore deposits and 26 per cent of its coal and potash.

Germany was to pay substantial reparations for 'civilian damage', because it was held responsible, along with its allies, for causing the war with its heavy losses. However, a definite sum was not specified in the treaty, but would be decided upon after the conference by a specially-appointed Reparations Commission. In 1921, the sum of £6,000 million was set, but this was further reduced in subsequent years. Germany's army and navy were drastically cut in size, the army to 100,000 long-serving volunteers, and the country was forbidden to have an air force.

Despite these terms, Germany retained a strong economic, industrial and territorial position at the heart of Europe, with a vigorous and expanding population of 66 million. The peace settlement left it in a potentially dominant position in Europe, wounded but not seriously hurt. This outcome reflected the aim of the United States and the allied powers at Paris, which was not to crush Germany or to break up the new empire, but rather to contain the country's military power.

Germany incensed

It was the settlement in eastern Europe which most incensed the Germans, since the German army, though ultimately defeated in the west, had been victorious on the eastern front. German leaders attacked the territorial losses to the new Polish state in the shape of the 'Polish corridor' and Upper Silesia, the prohibition on Anschluss or union with Austria, and the incorporation of large numbers of former Habsburg Sudeten Germans into the new state of Czechoslovakia as violations of Wilson's promises.



German cartoon: Versailles sends Germany to the guillotine ©

Danzig... was established as a free city under the League of Nations...

As a result of their bitter protests, the port of Danzig, with its close-on half a million German inhabitants, was established as a free city under the League of Nations rather than being ceded to Poland.

In addition, the population of Upper Silesia was to be given the chance to vote in a future plebiscite on whether they wished to remain in Germany or become a part of the new Polish state.

Other revisions were also built into the treaty. The Rhineland was to be occupied for 15 years, but troops were to be progressively withdrawn at five-year intervals provided Germany carried out the treaty terms. The inhabitants of the Saar basin were to be offered a plebiscite after 15 years to establish whether they wished to return to Germany, join France or remain under the supervision of the League of Nations. And in due course it was assumed that Germany would be admitted to the newly created League of Nations.

A stab in the back

Inevitably, it proved impossible to frame a treaty which would both satisfy the demands of the French and British populations for a punitive treaty and comply with German conceptions of a fair and 'Wilsonian' peace. The Allies constructed the peace settlement on the assumption that while the Germans would not like many of the terms, they would accept them as the inevitable consequence of defeat.



German cartoon: Wilson goes to meet his master in hell ©

But large sections of the population in Germany did not believe that their country had been honourably defeated on the battlefield. They believed in the rumours sweeping across Germany that the push for victory of their valiant troops on the Western Front had been sabotaged by traitors and pacifists at home who had spread disaffection and revolution.

This 'stab in the back' had prevented the gallant soldiers from securing the victory which was almost in their grasp. Thus a treaty which not only confirmed German defeat, but which, in clause 231, justified its demands for punitive war costs by laying the blame for the outbreak of the war firmly on German shoulders, was bound to provoke fury. Germany was a country which saw itself as having been encircled by France, Russia and Britain in 1914 and provoked into war.

In the frenzied post-war atmosphere, politicians from all parties agreed that the treaty, and in particular its despised 'War Guilt' clause, was vindictive, unfair and impossible to execute. They portrayed it as an unjust peace, and appealed to progressive forces across Europe to help them to revise it.

Such tactics were extremely successful in dividing the victorious coalition which had defeated Germany and negotiated the peace. Within a year, the United States Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles and signed a separate peace with Germany, leaving Britain and France bitterly opposed over how to proceed. While British leaders now sought further revisions to the treaty in a bid to conciliate Germany, France demanded strict enforcement of the terms.

It was the total failure of the victorious powers to work closely together after 1919 to contain German power, rather than the specific terms of the peace settlement, which was one of the contributing factors to the outbreak of a second world war 20 years later.

Find out more

Books

The Origins of the Second World War in Europe by P Bell (Longman, 1986)

The Treaty of Versailles edited by M Boemeke, G Feldman & E Glaser (Cambridge UP, 1998)

Peacemakers by Margaret MacMillan (John Murray, 2001)

Versailles and After by R Henig (Routledge, 1995)

The Versailles Peace Settlement by A Lentin (The Historical Association, 1991)

Land and Power: British and Allied Policy on Germany's Frontiers, 1916-19 by H Nelson (David and Charles, 1971)

The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking in Paris by A Sharp (Macmillan, 1991)

Links

The Treaty of Versailles In full, from the World War One document archive.

learn.co.uk A wealth of information from learn.co.uk about World War One and the issues dominating the peace conference.

Trenches on the web A vast amount of World War One material.

About the author

Dr Ruth Henig is a Senior Lecturer in modern history at Lancaster University, and author of several books and pamphlets on 20th-century international history.