**The Treaty of Versailles**



The Treaty of Versailles was the peace settlement signed after [World War One](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/world_war_one.htm) had ended in 1918 and in the shadow of the [Russian Revolution](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/march_revolution_1917.htm) and other events in [Russia](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/russia_1900_1939.htm). The treaty was signed at the vast Versailles Palace near Paris - hence its title - between Germany and the Allies. The three most important politicians there were [David Lloyd George](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/david_lloyd_george.htm), [Georges Clemenceau](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/georges_clemenceau.htm) and [Woodrow Wilson](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/woodrow_wilson.htm).

The Versailles Palace was considered the most appropriate venue simply because of its size - many hundreds of people were involved in the process and the final signing ceremony in the Hall of Mirrors could accommodate hundreds of dignitaries. Many wanted [Germany](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/weimar_germany.htm), now led by [Friedrich Ebert](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/friedrich_ebert.htm), smashed; others, like [Lloyd George](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/david_lloyd_george.htm), were privately more cautious.

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| **The attitude towards Germany of the "Big Three"** |

The treaty was signed on **June 28th 1919** after months of argument and negotiation amongst the so-called "Big Three" as to what the treaty should contain.

Who were the "Big Three" and where did they clash over Germany and her treatment after the war ?

The "Big Three" were [**David** **Lloyd George**](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/david_lloyd_george.htm)of Britain, [**Clemenceau**](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/georges_clemenceau.htm) of France and [**Woodrow**](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/woodrow_wilson.htm) [**Wilson**](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/woodrow_wilson.htm)of America.

[**David Lloyd George**](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/david_lloyd_george.htm)**of Great Britain**had two views on how Germany should be treated.

His public image was simple. He was a politician and politicians needed the support of the public to succeed in elections. If he had come across as being soft on Germany, he would have been speedily voted out of office. The British public was after revenge and Lloyd George's public image reflected this mood. "Hang the Kaiser" and "Make Germany Pay" were two very common calls in the era immediately after the end of the war and Lloyd George, looking for public support, echoed these views.

However, in private Lloyd George was also very concerned with the rise of communism in Russia  and he feared that it might spread to western Europe. After the war had finished, Lloyd George believed that the spread of communism posed a far greater threat to the world than a defeated Germany. Privately, he felt that Germany should be treated in such a way that left her as a barrier to resist the expected spread of communism. He did not want the people of Germany to become so disillusioned with their government that they turned to communism. Lloyd George did not want Germany treated with lenience but he knew that Germany would be the only country in central Europe that could stop the spread of communism if it burst over the frontiers of Russia. Germany had to be punished but not to the extent that it left her destitute. However, it would have been political suicide to have gone public with these views.

[**Georges Clemenceau**](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/georges_clemenceau.htm)**of France**had one very simple belief - Germany should be brought to its knees so that she could never start a war again.

This reflected the views of the French public but it was also what Clemenceau himself believed in. He had seen the north-east corner of France destroyed and he determined that Germany should never be allowed to do this again. "The Tiger" did not have to adapt his policies to suit the French public - the French leader and the French public both thought alike.

[**Woodrow Wilson**](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/woodrow_wilson.htm)**of**[**America**](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/america_1918.htm) had been genuinely stunned by the savagery of the [Great War](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/world_war_one.htm). He could not understand how an advanced civilization could have reduced itself so that it had created so much devastation.

In [America](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/america_1918.htm), there was a growing desire for the government to adopt a policy of isolation and leave Europe to its own devices. In failing health, Wilson wanted America to concentrate on itself and, despite developing the idea of a [League of Nations](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/leagueofnations.htm), he wanted an American input into Europe to be kept to a minimum. He believed that Germany should be punished but in a way that would lead to European reconciliation as opposed to revenge.

Linked to the "Big Three" was**Italy**led by [**Vittorio Orlando**](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/vittorio_orlando.htm). He was frequently left on the sidelines when the important negotiations took place despite Italy fighting on the side of the Allies. Why was Italy treated in this manner?

At the start of the war in 1914, [Italy](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/italy_1900_to_1939.htm) should have fought with Germany and Austria as she had signed the Triple Alliance which dictated that if one of the three was attacked, the other two would go to that country's aid. Italy did not join in on Germany's side but waited until 1915 and joined the side of Britain and France. This association with Germany was enough to taint Italy in the eyes of the "Big Three". Also Italy had not played an overwhelming part in the war. Her army had been beaten at the battles of Caporetto. Her strategic importance to central Europe was minimal whilst Britain dominated the Mediterranean with naval bases in Malta and Gibraltar. Italy's potential military clout in 1919, should the need arise to put pressure on Germany and Austria, was limited.

Therefore, the three main nations in the lead up to the treaty were far from united on how Germany should be treated. The eventual treaty seemed to satisfy everyone on the sides of the Allies. For France, it appeared as if Germany had been smashed; for Britain, [Lloyd George](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/david_lloyd_george.htm) was satisfied that enough of Germany's power had been left to act as a buffer to communist expansion from [Russia](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/russia_1900_1939.htm); [Wilson](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/woodrow_wilson.htm) was simply happy that the proceedings had finished so that he could return home.

So what exactly did the treaty do to Germany?

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| **The terms of the Treaty of Versailles** |

The treaty can be divided into a number of sections; territorial, military, financial and general.

**Territorial**

The following land was taken away from Germany :

Alsace-Lorraine (given to France)

Eupen and Malmedy (given to Belgium)

Northern Schleswig (given to Denmark)

Hultschin (given to Czechoslovakia)

West Prussia, Posen and Upper Silesia (given to Poland)

The Saar, Danzig and Memel were put under the control of the League of Nations and the people of these regions would be allowed to vote to stay in Germany or not in a future referendum.

The [League of Nations](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/leagueofnations.htm) also took control of Germany's overseas colonies.  
Germany had to return to [Russia](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/russia_1917_1939.htm) land taken in the [Treaty of](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/treaty_of_brest-litovsk.htm) [Brest-Litovsk](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/treaty_of_brest-litovsk.htm). Some of this land was made into new states : Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. An enlarged Poland also received some of this land.

**Military**

Germany’s army was reduced to 100,000 men; the army was not allowed tanks

She was not allowed an air force She was allowed only 6 capital naval ships and no submarines The west of the Rhineland and 50 kms east of the River Rhine was made into a demilitarized zone (DMZ). No German soldier or weapon was allowed into this zone. The Allies were to keep an army of occupation on the west bank of the Rhine for 15 years.

**Financial**

The loss of vital industrial territory would be a severe blow to any attempts by Germany to rebuild her economy. Coal from the Saar and Upper Silesia in particular was a vital economic loss. Combined with the financial penalties linked to reparations, it seemed clear to Germany that the Allies wanted nothing else but to bankrupt her.

Germany was also forbidden to unite with Austria to form one superstate, in an attempt to keep her economic potential to a minimum.

**General**

There are three vital clauses here:

1. Germany had to admit full responsibility for starting the war. This was Clause 231 - the infamous "War Guilt Clause". 2. Germany, as she was responsible for starting the war as stated in clause 231, was, therefore responsible for all the war damage caused by the First World War. Therefore, she had to pay reparations, the bulk of which would go to France and Belgium to pay for the damage done to the infrastructure of both countries by the war. Quite literally, reparations would be used to pay for the damage to be repaired. Payment could be in kind or cash. The figure was not set at Versailles - it was to be determined later. The Germans were told to write a blank cheque which the Allies would cash when it suited them. The figure was eventually put at £6,600 million - a huge sum of money well beyond Germany’s ability to pay.

        3. A [League of Nations](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/leagueofnations.htm) was set up to keep world peace.   
              
            In fact, the first 26 clauses of the treaty dealt with the League's organization.

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| **The German reaction to the Treaty of Versailles** |

After agreeing to the Armistice in November 1918, the Germans had been convinced that they would be consulted by the Allies on the contents of the Treaty. This did not happen and the Germans were in no position to continue the war as her army had all but disintegrated. Though this lack of consultation angered them, there was nothing they could do about it. Therefore, the first time that the German representatives saw the terms of the Treaty was just weeks before they were due to sign it in the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles on June 28th 1919.

There was anger throughout Germany when the terms were made public. The Treaty became known as a Diktat - as it was being forced on them and the Germans had no choice but to sign it. Many in Germany did not want the Treaty signed, but the representatives there knew that they had no choice as Germany was incapable of restarting the war again.

In one last gesture of defiance, the captured German naval force held at Scapa Flow (north of Scotland) scuttled itself i.e. deliberately sank itself.

Germany was given two choices:

1) sign the Treaty or   
2) be invaded by the Allies.

They signed the Treaty as in reality they had no choice. When the ceremony was over, Clemenceau went out into the gardens of Versailles and said "It is a beautiful day".