

The Treaty of Versailles – An Overview (from www.facinghistory.org)

When the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, President Woodrow Wilson vowed that this would truly be “the war to end all wars.” He argued that the war would have been fought in vain if the world returned to the way it was in 1914. The President revealed his goals in a 1918 speech. In it, he listed fourteen points essential to achieving lasting peace. In his view, the most important was the final one. It called for a “league of nations,” where nations would resolve differences around a table rather than on a battlefield.

Wilson based his proposals on a single principle **[primary source]**: “It is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak. Unless this principle be made its foundation, no part of the structure of international justice can stand.”

Wilson also believed that frustrated nationalism had caused the war. Thus he reasoned that if each ethnic group in Europe had its own land and government, there would be less chance of another war. He called the idea self-determination. As a result, the Austro-Hungarian, German, Ottoman, and Russian empires all disappeared. In Europe, each was divided into independent nations. The victors did not even consider applying that principle to the rest of the world. When the Japanese asked that a statement opposing racial discrimination be written into the treaty, the idea was rejected. When a young Vietnamese nationalist known as Ho Chi Minh asked to address the allies, the victors refused to let him speak. Europe’s map might be redrawn but not the maps of Asia or Africa. Both continents would continue to be ruled by Europeans.

Many Europeans were more interested in punishing the Germans than in preventing another world war. After all, the United States had been at war for just one year. Its European allies had been fighting for over four years. David Lloyd George of Britain demanded that Germany pay for the trouble it had caused; Vittorio Orlando of Italy insisted on a share of Germany’s colonial empire. And France’s Georges Clemenceau required not only the return of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine but also assurances that his nation would be safe from future German aggression. Therefore the treaty contained the following articles **[primary source]**:

- 80. Germany will respect the independence of Austria.
- 81. Germany recognizes the complete independence of Czechoslovakia.
- 87. Germany recognizes the complete independence of Poland.
- 119. Germany surrenders all her rights and titles over her overseas countries.
- 159. The German military forces shall be demobilized and reduced not to exceed 100,000 men.
- 181. The German navy must not exceed 6 battleships, 6 light cruisers, 12 destroyers, and 12 torpedo boats. No submarines are to be included.
- 198. The Armed Forces of Germany must not include any military or naval air forces.
- 231. Germany and her Allies accept the responsibility for causing all the loss and damage to the Allied Powers.
- 233. Germany will pay for all damages done to the civilian population and property of the Allied Governments. [The figure was later set at \$33 billion].
- 428. To guarantee the execution of the Treaty, the German territory situated to the west of the Rhine River will be occupied by Allied troops for fifteen years.
- 431. The occupation forces will be withdrawn as soon as Germany complies with the Treaty.

Not surprisingly, Germans felt betrayed by the treaty. One German newspaper, *Deutsche Zeitung*, denounced it with these words in 1919 **[primary source]**: “In the place where, in the glorious year of 1871, the German Empire in all its glory had its origin, today German honor is being carried to its grave. Do not forget it! The German people will, with unceasing labor, press forward to re-conquer the place among the nations to which it is entitled. Then will come vengeance for the shame of 1919.”¹ That view was widely shared in Germany. Even German Communists opposed the agreement.

A number of non-German observers and some historians also considered the treaty too harsh. Others noted that it was not nearly as vindictive as the one Germany forced on Russia just a year earlier. When Wilson arrived in Paris, he was cheered. By the time the Treaty of Versailles was completed in May of 1919, his popularity had dimmed not only abroad but also at home. Many Americans felt that Europe’s problems were not their concern. They preferred isolation to a continuing involvement in world affairs. So, despite Wilson’s pleas, the United States did not join the League of Nations. The League also began its work without Germany and the USSR. Both were viewed as “outlaw” nations. As a result, the League was an international peacekeeper that failed to include three key nations.