

What was the Treaty of Versailles and why did it fail?

This article looks in detail at the legal document ending the state of hostilities between Germany and the Allies in the First World War

Exam links

- AQA 1L** The quest for political stability: Germany, 1871–1991
- AQA 2K** International relations and global conflict, c.1890–1941
- EDEXCEL paper 3, option 37.2** Germany 1871–1990: united, divided and reunited
- OCR Y218/Y248** International relations 1890–1941
- OCR Y221/Y251** Democracy and dictatorships in Germany 1919–1963

The Treaty of Versailles was signed on 28 June 1919 in the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles outside Paris. The date was precisely 5 years after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary in Sarajevo (the event often thought of as decisive in setting off the chain of events leading to the outbreak of the First World War).

The nature of the peace

The treaty was unusual in terms of the way it was constructed. After the Napoleonic wars, for example, the Treaty of Peace of 1815 was written with French delegates at the table. After the 1914–18 war, however, German delegates were shunned. They did not negotiate the settlement. They were apprised of its provisions and given the right only to reject them. To do so would have ended the Armistice of 11 November and renewed the war. Hence the German delegation at Versailles had no choice but to sign the document.

Short time-frame

The elaboration of the different parts of the treaty had taken 6 months to complete. The reason it had to be done rapidly was that armies could not be demobilised until it was signed. Soldiers everywhere wanted only one order — to return home — and many were restless or mutinous at the delay in doing so. But the shortness of time available for deliberations ensured that many important questions would be answered too hastily and without sufficient thought as to their consequences.



A session of the Versailles deliberations, 1919

for the enormousity of the war and its terrible human consequences. There were two other elements of the form of the peace deliberations that were significant. The first was that Russia was not there. Having capitulated to imperial Germany, Russia had no standing among the victorious powers. Revolutionary Russia was invited to the conference, during the 6 months of which a vast civil war unfolded. Its outcome was totally unpredictable.

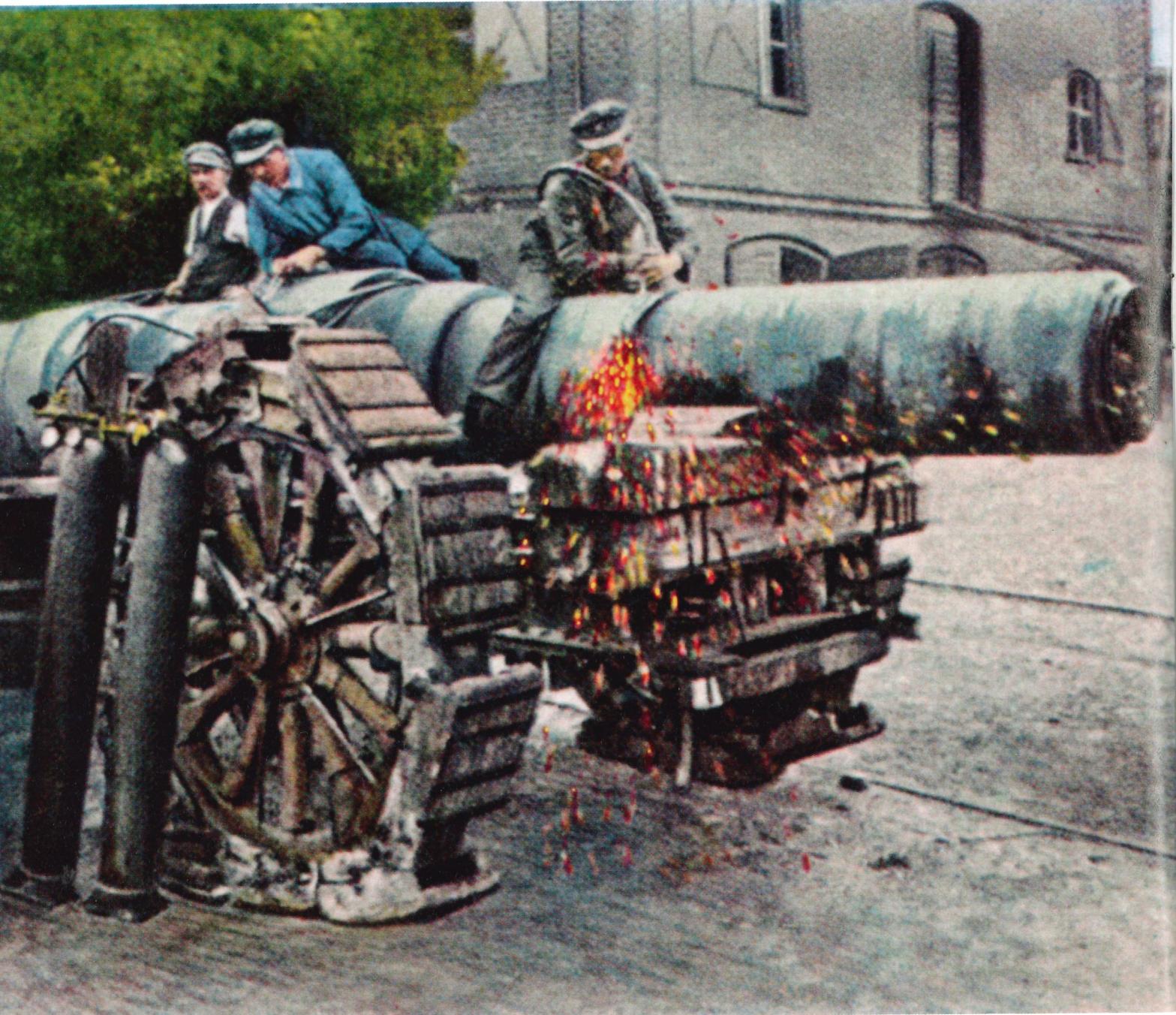
Second, the USA signed the document not as an ally but as an associated power. This underscored American sensitivities about retaining command of their own troops during a future war, and about the need for the US Senate to ratify the treaty after all.

President Woodrow Wilson proposed Fourteen Points as a basis for a new style of international diplomacy which would hopefully make war less likely. They included condemnation of secret diplomacy, freedom for all to navigate the high seas, reduction of trade barriers and national self-determination.

The principle of self-determination stated that nations had the right to govern themselves. This was very difficult to apply in areas like Eastern Europe where numerous nationalities and ethnicities lived in overlapping territories and where clear borders acceptedable to all could not be drawn.

BOX | Wilson's Fourteen Points

Japan and China



German armaments were dismantled in accordance with the peace treaty

its signing. That ratification never happened. Thus the two greatest powers of the twentieth century — Russia and the USA — were not part of the peace settlement of 1919.

There were six separate peace treaties including that signed on 28 June 1919 in Versailles. Apart from Lausanne (1923), they were named after the Paris regions and palaces in which they were signed. The six treaties and the principal enemy signatory were:

- Versailles 28 June 1919 with Germany
- St Germain-en-Laye 10 September 1919 with Austria
- Neuilly 27 November 1919 with Bulgaria
- Trianon 4 June 1920 with Hungary

- Sèvres 10 August 1920 with Ottoman Turkey
 - Lausanne 24 July 1923 with Republic of Turkey
- They formally ended the state of hostilities between the Allies and the other powers which had fought on the side of Germany.

Violent repercussions

The Treaty of Versailles ended the war on the Western front, between Germany on one side, and Britain, France, Belgium, Portugal, Romania and the USA on the other side. This reality has led to a distorted view of what was accomplished at Versailles.

Between 1919 and 1923 violence engulfed the defeated powers, and spread to some of the victors

The League of Nations was the first worldwide association of states coming together with the shared aims of reducing international conflicts, promoting mutual prosperity and supervising colonialism. It refigured the United Nations. It did not include all states of the time.

The defeated powers, for example, were deprived of most of their colonial territories. These were mandated other countries — including France, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Japan — to administer them on its behalf. The USA did not seek to formally taken over by the League of Nations which mandated other countries — including France, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Japan — to administer them on its behalf. The USA did not seek to

Box 2 The League of Nations

The third reason why the treaty failed was that it ignored the fact that the pre-condition for post-war stability was economic mess. Inflation was rampant. There were thousands of miles of new borders and new banking systems to set in motion. Every nation was saddled with war debt. The USA also required the Allies to repay the loans made to them during the war.

Economics

The second fundamental reason why the Peace treaty failed was that the arbitrary borders assigned to the successor states of the defeated powers created resentments in all of them. This was true in Germany among many on the left as well as on the right. It was also true in the new bordering states with large ethnically German populations. Others felt similarly outraged by the settlement. Hungary lost two-thirds of its pre-war population. The meaning of the term self-determination of peoples (see Box 1), dear to the heart of Woodrow Wilson and other liberals, vanished when confronted with the reality that self-determination was only meant for those who fought alongside Central Powers.

Self-determination of peoples

The above problem is why, on two occasions, the US Senate refused to compromise American sovereignty by ratifying the document. Then, over time, all the other powers retreated into the pre-1914 view that each nation was the sole guardian of its sovereign interests. The League did much good through its subsidiary offices — the International Labour Bureau and its Health Organisation, in particular — but it did not change the basis of international relations, which still rested on the principle of absolute state sovereignty as the bedrock of international law.

of national sovereignty as the bedrock of international

Why the peace treaty failed The treaty had multiple facets. Security and sovereignty

The terms of the settlement

too. Ireland was in revolt against British rule. Morocco faced an insurrection against its Spanish overlords known as the Rif War, which lasted until 1927. All over eastern and southern Europe, there were civil wars, wars of national liberation, wars of ethnic cleansing, and wars of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements, accompanied by famine and the worst series of epidemic diseases in modern European history.

The Treaty of Versailles therefore signalled, not the beginning of peace, but the opening of a set of wars after the war, continuing in a vast swathe of territory extending from Finland to Egypt until 1924.



Germans protest against the treaty outside the Reichstag, 1919

The system of reparations payments in cash and in kind required of the defeated powers made sense in terms of the need to rebuild devastated areas and lives among the victorious populations. But it made no sense in terms of the revival of the European economy in the aftermath of the war. Europe a decade after the war was a poorer, more embittered, and much more dangerous place than it had been in 1913. There were some years of prosperity in the later 1920s, but when the world economic crisis hit in 1929, it exposed the weaknesses and blindnesses embedded in the treaty which ensured that the hope of peace and a new order out of which it came would vanish completely in the 1930s.

Conclusion

Historians are divided in their judgement of the Treaty of Versailles. There are those who believe that no one could have done any better than the chief negotiators at the time. The Allied armies had to go home, and the peace settlement that enabled them to do so was the best that could have been hoped for. More critical historians emphasise the contradictions between and among the Allies, who wanted very different things out of the peace. They point to the very different ways the peace after 1919 was fashioned — with Russia and the USA front and centre and with economic recovery of both Germany and Europe as a whole as a primary objective.

Key figures

Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924)

President of the USA from 1913 to 1921. He proposed Fourteen Points on which the peace agreements should be negotiated (see Box 1).

Vittorio Emmanuele Orlando (1860–1952)

Italian prime minister (1917–19) and head of delegation at Versailles.

David Lloyd-George (1863–1945)

British prime minister (1916–22) and leading statesman. Leader of the Liberal Party.

Georges Clemenceau (1841–1929)

French prime minister (1906–9 and 1917–20). Noted for his fierce determination that Germany should pay for war damage and restore Alsace and Lorraine.

The middle point between those who write for or against Versailles may be this — the authors of the peace settlement prepared the ground for a much sounder peace after 1945, which stood the test of time. This was perhaps their greatest, though unintended legacy.

Jay Winter is professor of modern history at Yale University. He is a leading specialist on the First World War and its impact.