TREATY OF VERSAILLES

The Treaty of Versailles was the peace settlement signed after World War One had ended in 1918. 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, Georges Clemenceau and Woodrow Wilson. Many wanted Germany, now lead by Friedrich Ebert, smashed - others, like Lloyd George, were privately more cautious.

BACKGROUND

World War One had left Europe devastated. Those countries that had fought in it, had suffered casualties never experienced before.

The total deaths of all nations who fought in the war is thought to have been 8.5 million with 21 million being wounded.

Alongside these statistics, was the fact that vast areas of north-eastern Europe had been reduced to rubble. Flanders in Belgium had been all but destroyed. The homes of 750,000 French people were destroyed and the infrastructure of this region had also been severely damaged. Roads, coal mines, telegraph poles had all been destroyed and such a loss greatly hindered the area's ability to function normally.

The victors from World War One were in no mood to be charitable to the defeated nations and Germany in particular was held responsible for the war and its consequences.

ATTITUDES TOWARD GERMANY

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 of Britain, Clemenceau of France and Woodrow Wilson of America.

David Lloyd George 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** 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. He did not have to adapt his policies to suit the French public - the French leader and the French public both thought alike.

**Woodrow Wilson** of America had been genuinely stunned by the savagery of the Great War. He could not understand how an advanced civilization could have reduced itself so that it had created so much devastation.

In America, 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, 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.

He had already written about what he believed the world should be like in his "Fourteen Points" The main points in this document were:

1) no more secret treaties  
2) countries must seek to reduce their weapons and their armed forces  
3) national self-determination should allow people of the same nationality to govern themselves and one nationality should not have the power to govern another  
4) all countries should belong to the League of Nations.

Linked to the "Big Three" was Italy lead by Vittorio Orlando. 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 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 strategic importance was minimal and her potential military clout in 1919, should the need arise to put pressure on Germany and Austria, was effectively non-existent.

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 was satisfied that enough of Germany's power had been left to act as a buffer to communist expansion from Russia; Wilson was simply happy that the proceedings had finished so that he could return home.

So what exactly did the treaty do to Germany?
TERMS OF THE TREATY

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)
- The League of Nations also took control of Germany's overseas colonies.
- Germany had to return to Russia land taken in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Some of this land was made into new states. 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 airforce
- 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. 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 check, 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 was set up to keep world peace.

**GERMAN REACTION**

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 on June 28th 1919.

There was anger throughout Germany when the terms were made public. The Treaty 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 German was incapable of restarting the war again.

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.

**CONSEQUENCES OF THE TREATY**

- The Treaty seemed to satisfy the "Big Three" as in their eyes it was a just peace as it kept Germany weak yet strong enough to stop the spread of communism; kept the French border with Germany safe from another German attack and created the organization, the League of Nations, that would end warfare throughout the world.
- However, it left a mood of anger throughout Germany as it was felt that as a nation Germany had been unfairly treated.
- Above all else, Germany hated the clause blaming her for the cause of the war and the resultant financial penalties the treaty was bound to impose on Germany.
- Many German citizens felt that they were being punished for the mistakes of the German government in August 1914, as it was the government that had declared war not the people.

Throughout the 1920’s, in nearly all parts of the Treaty, the terms were carried out. It was after 1933, that there was a systematic breaking of the terms when the Nazis came to power.