

TREATY OF VERSAILLES

Introduction

Signed in June 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference, the Treaty of Versailles was an agreement between Germany and the Allied Powers following World War I. The Treaty required Germany to accept responsibility for losses and damages caused by Germany and its allies during the war. Germany's military was severely limited, and the country was required to pay large fines, called reparations, to countries that had been damaged by the war. The Allies also sought prosecution of some German leaders for war crimes. Germany was angered and embarrassed by the punishment but had little choice but to accept the terms. Allied troops also occupied parts of western Germany, which caused additional resentment.

The Fourteen Points

The 28th President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, was in office for eight years from 1913–1921. When World War I broke out in 1914, President Wilson initially tried to keep the United States neutral and promote peace between the Allied Powers and Central Powers. The Central Powers included Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria. Wilson eventually requested that Congress declare war on Germany in 1917 after Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare and tensions between the two countries increased.

After the Allied forces defeated Germany in 1918, Wilson presented a plan called the Fourteen Points. At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, he proposed these points as an outline for creating peace after the war. Wilson's Fourteen Points, listed below, were a vision of a world united by peace, not by war. However, the United Kingdom and France objected to several parts of the proposal. The United States Senate later refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles. The Fourteen Points are listed below:

1. Countries should not make secret treaties with one another.
2. Ships should have freedom to travel the seas during peace and war.
3. Nations should reduce barriers to international trade.
4. Countries should reduce their military forces.
5. Colonial claims should consider the interests of the people living there.
6. Foreign troops should leave Russia, and Russia should determine its own future.
7. Foreign troops should leave Belgium, and its independence should be restored.
8. German troops should leave France, and Alsace-Lorraine should be returned to France.
9. Italy's borders should reflect areas where Italian-speaking people lived.

10. The peoples of Austria-Hungary should have greater opportunities for self-government.
11. Balkan states should be restored, and Serbia should have access to the sea.
12. Peoples within the Ottoman Empire should have opportunities for self-government.
13. An independent Poland should be created with access to the sea.
14. A League of Nations should be created to help maintain peace.

The Paris Peace Conference

The Paris Peace Conference, where the Treaty of Versailles was developed, lasted more than six months. Although several countries participated, leaders from the United Kingdom, Italy, France, and the United States dominated many of the peace talks. Each country had different goals for the treaty. France wanted to weaken Germany militarily and economically to protect itself from future German aggression. The United Kingdom wanted Germany punished but also wanted Germany to recover enough to remain an important trade partner. Italy wanted additional territory and was disappointed that it did not receive everything it expected. Japan wanted greater influence in East Asia and control of former German territories in the Pacific. Japan also proposed a racial equality clause that was not included in the final agreement. U.S. President Wilson hoped to create a more peaceful international system. His Fourteen Points emphasized ideas such as diplomacy, national self-determination, and the creation of the League of Nations. Germany had little influence over the final terms of the treaty.

The Terms of the Versailles Treaty

Talks between the leaders at the Paris Peace Conference were complicated. The United States had entered the war later than the European Allied Powers and experienced much less destruction at home. France, the United Kingdom, Italy, and other European nations had suffered enormous military and economic losses during the war. Russia, which left the war following the Russian Revolution, did not participate in the negotiations because the Allied Powers did not recognize its new Bolshevik government. Germany and the other defeated Central Powers were also excluded from the main negotiations.

When the talks were over and the treaty was written, Germany received harsh terms. The country lost about 13% of its European territory and control of all its overseas colonies. Germany's army was limited to 100,000 soldiers, its navy was greatly reduced, and the country was not permitted to have an air force. Germany also lost most of its submarines and many military ships. The Treaty called for some German leaders to face prosecution for war crimes, although few were ultimately tried. Germany was also required to accept responsibility for wartime damages caused by Germany and its allies. This responsibility became the basis for large reparations payments to countries harmed during the war.

Criticism of Versailles Treaty

Many Germans strongly opposed the Treaty. After the war, Germany faced food shortages, political instability, and major economic problems. The Allied naval blockade had continued for several months after the fighting ended, contributing to shortages. Germany was also required to make large reparations payments, which became an additional economic burden. In 1921, the total reparations bill was set at 132 billion gold marks. German political leaders faced strong public pressure, and some officials resigned rather than support the Treaty.

France was also dissatisfied with parts of the Treaty because its leaders worried that Germany could become a military threat again. French leaders wanted strong protections against another German invasion. Some leaders in the United Kingdom, however, believed the punishment against Germany was too severe and worried that harsh treatment could create resentment and instability. Britain was satisfied with Germany's reduced naval power and gained control of several former German colonies.

Italy was unhappy because it did not receive all of the territory its leaders believed had been promised during the war. Japan also wanted control over former German territories in Asia and the Pacific. Japan received several former German possessions but was disappointed when its proposal for a racial equality clause was rejected. This contributed to feelings among some Japanese leaders that Western powers did not treat Japan as an equal.

Even though President Wilson was heavily involved in developing the peace settlement, the United States Senate refused to ratify the Treaty. Many Americans opposed joining the League of Nations because they worried it could require the United States to become involved in future international conflicts. Many smaller nations were also excluded from the most important negotiations and believed that the major Allied powers were making decisions that affected everyone.

THE RISE OF DICTATORS

After the stock market crash of 1929, countries around the world experienced severe economic hardship. The Great Depression lasted throughout much of the 1930s. Poverty, hunger, and unemployment were widespread in the United States and many other countries. At the same time, democracy weakened in several parts of Europe as political instability and economic suffering caused people to lose confidence in existing governments.

The 1930s were difficult for many countries, especially those still recovering from World War I. Some people began to believe that their democratic governments could not solve problems such as unemployment, inflation, and poverty. Political movements that promised dramatic change gained support. As people struggled with hunger and unemployment, leaders seeking greater power promised to restore their economies, strengthen their nations, and improve their lives.

Authoritarian leaders promised to solve many of the problems people faced. They promised to improve their economies so that fewer people would go hungry or homeless. They promised to make their countries powerful and respected. They also promised to restore law and order. Once in power, however, many dictators restricted political freedoms and targeted groups they considered enemies. During the years between the world wars, authoritarian governments developed in Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, and the Soviet Union.

Germany

Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany during the years after World War I. He openly promoted antisemitism and hatred toward groups including Jewish people, Romani people, ethnic Poles, Slavic people, disabled people, and other groups the Nazis considered undesirable. Hitler was also extremely critical of the Treaty of Versailles. He argued that the terms imposed on Germany were too severe:

- Germany had to accept responsibility for wartime damages caused by Germany and its allies.
- Germany lost territory in Europe and all of its overseas colonies.
- Germany's military was severely limited.
- The Treaty called for German leaders accused of war crimes to face prosecution.
- Germany had to pay billions in reparations for wartime damages.

Many Germans who were struggling to rebuild their country after World War I and during the Great Depression became attracted to Hitler's promises of economic recovery and national strength. He used public anger about the Treaty and the economy to increase his popularity. In 1933, Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany. The following year, he combined political

powers under his control, adopted the title “Führer,” and transformed Germany into a dictatorship.

Hitler gained support gradually. After World War I, Germany experienced serious economic instability, including extreme inflation during the early 1920s. Reparations, government debt, and other economic problems contributed to public frustration. The Great Depression beginning in 1929 made conditions much worse. The Nazi Party exploited this anger and falsely blamed Jewish people and other minorities for Germany’s problems. Nazi racial ideology claimed that so-called “Aryans” were superior and that Jewish, Romani, Slavic, and other people threatened Germany. These beliefs became the basis for increasingly discriminatory and violent Nazi policies.

In September 1939, Hitler’s forces invaded Poland in the early morning. Britain and France responded by declaring war on Germany, beginning World War II in Europe. Over the next two years, German forces invaded or attacked numerous European countries, including Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Yugoslavia, France, and the Soviet Union.

Germany, Italy, and Japan eventually formalized their military and political partnership as the Axis Powers.

Italy

Italy followed a path similar to Germany. Fascism became an important political movement during the 1920s with the rise of Benito Mussolini and the National Fascist Party. In 1922, Mussolini organized the March on Rome and pressured the Italian government. King Victor Emmanuel III appointed Mussolini Prime Minister. Mussolini gradually destroyed democratic institutions, restricted political opposition, and established a dictatorship. He ruled Italy as a dictator from the 1920s until 1943. Mussolini also pursued territorial expansion in Africa and Europe. Italian forces used brutal tactics in Libya and Ethiopia, including mass imprisonment, forced relocation, and violence against civilians. Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935 and Albania in 1939 before formally joining Germany and Japan in the Axis alliance in 1940.

Japan

Japan, the third major Axis Power, experienced increasing military influence over its government during the 1930s. Japan’s economy faced serious challenges during the worldwide Depression, although industrial growth eventually helped the country recover. Japanese military leaders supported territorial expansion as a way to obtain resources and increase Japan’s power. Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931 and expanded its war against China beginning in 1937. Japanese forces later moved into parts of Southeast Asia, including French Indochina. In response to Japanese expansion, the United States restricted trade and eventually stopped exporting oil to Japan. On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, the U.S. naval base in

Hawaii. The attack led the United States to declare war on Japan and enter World War II. Hideki Tojo served as Prime Minister from 1941 to 1944, while Emperor Hirohito remained Japan's emperor throughout the war.

The Soviet Union

Joseph Stalin became the leader of the USSR, or Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, after a struggle for power following Vladimir Lenin's death. He became General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1922 and remained the Soviet Union's dominant leader until his death in 1953. Under Stalin, the government controlled much of the economy and society. Beginning in the late 1920s, Stalin introduced Five-Year Plans intended to rapidly industrialize the country. His government also relied on secret police, political repression, forced labor, and executions to eliminate opposition.

During the Great Purge of the late 1930s, hundreds of thousands of people were executed, and many more were arrested or sent to forced labor camps known as Gulags. Political leaders, military officers, government officials, and ordinary citizens were targeted. In August 1939, Stalin and Hitler signed the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, promising that the two countries would not attack one another. The agreement also secretly divided parts of Eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres of influence. The Soviet Union later occupied eastern Poland and annexed the Baltic states and other territories.

Spain

Francisco Franco became one of the leaders of a military uprising against Spain's democratic government in 1936. The uprising began the Spanish Civil War, which lasted until Franco's forces won in 1939. Franco then established an authoritarian dictatorship. His government used imprisonment, forced labor, executions, and political repression against opponents. Tens of thousands of people were executed during and after the war, while many more were imprisoned or forced into exile. Although Spain remained officially neutral during World War II, Franco's government generally sympathized with the Axis Powers because Germany and Italy had supported his forces during the Spanish Civil War. Franco remained in power until his death in 1975.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The Great Depression was a worldwide economic crisis that began in the United States in 1929 and spread rapidly to other countries. It lasted through much of the 1930s. The Depression did not cause World War II by itself, but the poverty, unemployment, political instability, and international tensions it created contributed to conditions that helped extremist political movements gain support.

The Stock Market Crash

In October 1929, the U.S. stock market crashed. Before the crash, easy credit, stock market speculation, overproduction, and uneven distribution of wealth had created weaknesses in the economy. Many people purchased stocks using borrowed money, while businesses and farms produced more goods than consumers could afford to buy. Farmers struggled with falling prices, and many industries had more products than they could sell. When stock prices collapsed, these existing weaknesses became much more serious.

The stock market crash caused many investors to lose money, but it was only one part of the larger economic crisis. Businesses closed as sales declined, and millions of people lost their jobs. Thousands of banks eventually failed, causing many families to lose their savings. As unemployment increased, people spent less money, which caused even more businesses to struggle. Many families depended on soup kitchens, bread lines, gardens, and other forms of assistance. Poverty and malnutrition became serious problems in communities throughout the United States. Similar economic problems spread to countries around the world.

The Economy

Between 1929 and 1933, the U.S. economy shrank dramatically, and thousands of banks failed. By 1933, around 15 million Americans were unemployed. International trade also collapsed as countries raised tariffs, struggled with debt, and reduced imports. European countries still recovering from World War I were hit especially hard. Economic hardship weakened confidence in governments and contributed to political instability. Japan was also heavily affected because it depended on international trade for important food and raw materials. By the mid-1930s, economic conditions began to improve in some countries, but recovery was slow and uneven. In the United States, full economic recovery did not occur until increased wartime production during World War II.

Rise of Authoritarianism

During the economic crisis, political leaders across Europe and Asia took advantage of public frustration and uncertainty. People in Germany, Italy, Spain, the Soviet Union, and other

countries wanted governments that could improve economic conditions and restore stability. Some became willing to support leaders who promised jobs, national strength, and dramatic political change. Adolf Hitler in Germany, Benito Mussolini in Italy, Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union, and Francisco Franco in Spain each used different political systems but developed governments with extensive authoritarian control.

Once in power, these leaders restricted political opposition and expanded government control. In Germany and Italy, fascist governments emphasized nationalism, military strength, and territorial expansion. The Soviet Union developed a communist dictatorship under Stalin. Other authoritarian governments developed across Europe and Asia. Economic hardship did not automatically produce dictatorship, but unemployment and political instability made extremist movements more attractive to some people.

The Great Depression was not the only reason World War II began, but it increased economic and political tensions around the world. Governments struggled to respond to unemployment, poverty, and international debt. Some citizens lost confidence in democratic political systems, while authoritarian leaders promised quick solutions. At the same time, countries such as Germany, Italy, and Japan pursued aggressive territorial expansion.

The Treaty of Versailles also remained a major source of resentment, especially in Germany. Italy was disappointed because it did not receive all of the territory its leaders expected after World War I. France remained concerned about another German attack, while the Soviet government had been excluded from the Paris Peace Conference. These unresolved political tensions combined with the economic problems of the Great Depression.

Britain and France later pursued a policy known as appeasement, making concessions to Hitler in an effort to avoid another major European war. Instead of stopping German expansion, these concessions allowed Hitler additional time to strengthen Germany's military and increased his confidence that Britain and France would avoid confrontation. German resentment toward the Treaty of Versailles, territorial ambitions, and the economic damage caused by the Great Depression further increased tensions.

In conclusion, the Great Depression was not the only cause of World War II, but it contributed significantly to the conditions that made another major conflict more likely. Unemployment, poverty, international economic problems, and political instability weakened governments and increased public frustration. Authoritarian leaders used these conditions to gain support, expand military power, and pursue aggressive policies that ultimately helped lead the world into another war.

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