

Treaty of Versailles: 100th Anniversary

Summary

This year marks 100 years since the Treaty of Versailles was signed. The treaty contained the terms of peace agreed between the Allied powers and Germany following cessation of hostilities in the First World War. The armistice signed by the Allies and Germany in November 1918 had ended the fighting but negotiations on long-term peace still had to take place. The Paris Peace Conference, which began in January 1919, was established to draft and finalise the terms of peace. Germany was not invited to take part in the conference, which was dominated by Britain, France, the US and Italy—the Council of Four. Germany was presented with the draft in May 1919, and the final text in June. German objections and counter-proposals were rejected by the Allies and on 22 June 1919, Germany was given 24 hours to accept the treaty. The following day the German government agreed to the terms. The treaty assigned responsibility for the war and legal liability for the damage caused to Germany and its allies. It established the League of Nations, an international organisation for resolving international disputes, and returned some German territories to Belgium and France. The sovereignty of several territories and colonies was transferred to the League of Nations.

On 28 June 1919, the Treaty of Versailles was signed in the Palace of Versailles, in the Hall of Mirrors. This briefing has been prepared in advance of the centenary. It provides an overview of the peace negotiations and a summary of the terms of the treaty.

Paris Peace Conference

The Paris Peace Conference was an international meeting convened in January 1919 at Versailles, just outside Paris. The purpose of the conference was to restore European and world peace after World War I.¹ The armistice signed by the Allies and Germany on 11 November 1918 had ended the fighting on the western front. However, the parties still had to agree the terms for peace.

In January 1919, the plenipotentiaries and delegates of over thirty states assembled in Paris for the peace conference.² At one point there were more than a thousand diplomats and statesmen in the city.³ The conference was opened officially on 18 January 1919 by the French President, Raymond Poincaré. However, the leaders and foreign ministers of Britain, France, the US, Italy, and two representatives from Japan, had been meeting since the previous week in an attempt to establish the rules of the conference.⁴ This group became known as the Council of Ten, although most present referred to it as the Supreme Council. It became the effective decision-making body until March 1919. By the end of March, the Supreme Council had evolved into the Council of Four, which consisted of the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, French Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau, US President, Woodrow Wilson, and Italian Prime Minister, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando. It met over 200 times, usually in President Wilson's house. The Council of Five was the conference of foreign ministers and included Japan.

According to the historian Margaret MacMillan, by spring 1919 it was common knowledge that there were differing views on what should be included in the settlement with Germany.⁵ However, there was consensus among the Council of Four on several issues. MacMillan argues that everyone agreed that the two provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, which France lost to Germany in 1871 in the Franco-German

War, should be returned. It was agreed that the damage done to Belgium and the north of France must be repaired and that Germany deserved punishment. MacMillan concludes that “punishment, payment, prevention—on these broad objectives there was agreement”.

However, there was conflict between the Allies on issues such as how much territory Germany should lose, whether any of its leaders should be tried as war criminals and how much it should pay in war damages.⁶ Clemenceau’s view was that Germany still posed a threat to France. He argued that the Rhineland should be removed from German control to ensure France’s security.⁷ France also wished to exploit the coal mines in the Saar area, to compensate itself for the mines destroyed by the retreating German army in 1918. According to the historian Alan Sharp, there was sympathy for the French demand. However, there was opposition to the French argument that to exploit the mineral resources of the region, France must also take over its government.⁸ A compromise was proposed. Germany would cede the ownership of the mines to France, and the League of Nations—an international ‘police force’—would have sovereignty over the area for 15 years. After this period, the inhabitants could choose to return to Germany, become French, or retain their special status under the League. By 10 April 1919, the Council of Four had accepted this solution. MacMillan and Sharp argue that France was willing to compromise on a number of its demands as long as its overriding goal of security was met.⁹

According to Sharp, the most difficult and contentious problem that the Ten were unable to come to a decision on was that of reparations. It was believed that in addition to the damage done as a consequence of industrialised warfare, German forces had deliberately caused additional destruction as they retreated in 1918.¹⁰ Germany had accepted in the pre-armistice agreement that it should make a contribution towards repairing the damage, but to what extent remained unclear. There was the issue of defining Germany’s total liability and producing a viable scheme for the discharge of the debt. Lloyd George believed that Germany should pay reparations, but the payments should cease, if possible, with the passing of the generation seen as responsible for the war.¹¹ He also argued that Germany should be allowed equal access to the world markets and resources: he wanted to “apply the doctrine of national self-determination”. Lloyd George was keen not to drive Germany “to throw her lot in with Bolshevism”. According to MacMillan, mainly because of British resistance, it proved “impossible” to agree on a figure.¹² At the end of March 1919, the Council of Four decided to create a Reparations Commission.

Negotiations with Germany

In April 1919, German delegates were invited to Versailles to discuss the terms of the treaty. The delegation, headed by Germany’s foreign minister, Count Brockdorff-Rantzau, arrived on 7 May, in a formal ceremony attended by the Allied powers. The German delegation were told that they had 15 days to make their written observations. There would be no meetings, and the main text of the treaty was not open to negotiations.¹³ Germany was given an extension and gave its objections and counter-proposals on 29 May 1919. The delegation complained that the treaty did not contain the “just and fair” terms that the Allies had promised.¹⁴ It insisted that by failing to set a limit on reparations, the amount would be fixed by the “capacity of the German people for payment, determined not by their standard of life but solely by their capacity to meet demands of their enemies by their labour”.¹⁵ However, the draft treaty stipulated that the commission had to consult Germany and take into account its capacity to pay.¹⁶ Brockdorff-Rantzau insisted that Germany would not take sole responsibility for the war.¹⁷

According to Sharp, Germany’s response had little effect on the treaty.¹⁸ When it was given the final text on 16 June 1919, the original wording had been changed in red ink in a few places. The Allies’

covering letter maintained that Germany was responsible for the war and the manner in which it was fought. The Allies allowed Germany five days to sign. Another extension was granted, and it had until 23 June to respond. The German delegation returned to Germany and advised against signing the treaty. According to MacMillan, the German Government, led by Chancellor Philipp Scheidemann, was divided.¹⁹ Political leaders in the west were for peace, as were the premiers of most of the German states. However, the nationalists were against signing. In the end, Brockdorff-Rantzau resigned and the Government collapsed. The new chancellor, Gustav Bauer, tried to place caveats in the clauses that dealt with 'war guilt' and war crimes.²⁰ The Council of Four rejected his proposals and presented Germany with a final ultimatum on 22 June 1919: sign the treaty within 24 hours or hostilities would resume. Germany ceded. On 28 June 1919, the Treaty of Versailles was signed in the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles. This was where the German Empire had been proclaimed in 1871, following Germany's victory in the Franco-German war. The treaty of Versailles came into force on 10 January 1920.

Terms of the Treaty of Versailles

The treaty contained 440 clauses. The main terms included:²¹

- **War guilt:** article 231 assigned responsibility to Germany and its allies for the war and affirmed its legal liability for the damage. This became known as the 'war guilt clause'.
- **Germany's armed forces:** the German army was limited to 100,000 men and a navy of 15,000. Conscription was banned. Germany was not allowed an air force, tanks, armoured cars, heavy guns or submarines. Most of its existing stocks of weapons and all its fortifications west of the Rhine and along its eastern bank were to be destroyed. The Rhineland became a demilitarised zone which meant that no German troops were allowed into that area. Only a few factories would be allowed to produce war materials. These terms were to be enforced by the Germans, supervised by the Inter-Allied Military Commission of Control (CMIC).²²
- **Reparations:** Germany had to pay reparations for the damage caused by the war. Article 232 restricted what was an unlimited German liability for the war. It stated that the Allies recognised that since Germany's resources were in fact limited, it should only be asked to pay for specified damages. In 1921, the Reparations Commission set a final total of 132 billion gold marks, approximately £6.5 billion.
- **German territories and colonies:** Alsace-Lorraine was returned to France; Eupen, Moresnet and Malmedy went to Belgium; north Schleswig went to Denmark; west Prussia and Posen went to Poland; and Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania became independent states. The League of Nations also took over the sovereignty of several regions: Danzig became a free city but was controlled by the League; France was given the mines in Saar but the region was to be controlled for 15 years by the League—with a vote by the population to be held on the matter after that time; and German colonies became mandates under the authority of the League of Nations.
- **League of Nations:** was set up as an international 'police force' to "promote international cooperation and to achieve international peace and security". Its remit was to take "any action [...] to safeguard the peace", establish procedures for arbitration and create the mechanisms for economic and military sanctions. The League was based on a covenant. The covenant and the constitution of the League of Nations were part of the terms of the treaty.
- **War crimes:** The terms of the treaty required Germany to deliver nationals accused of war crimes to the Allies to stand trial. The government in Germany initially agreed to these terms when they signed the Versailles Treaty. But it later negotiated to hold its own trials

before its Supreme Court in Leipzig. The Leipzig trials, held 1921–27, only covered a few cases.

In the US there was political opposition to the treaty, particularly with what were portrayed as the “entangling obligations of the League of Nations”.²³ On 19 November 1919, the Senate rejected the treaty, and did so again on 19 March 1920. The US signed separate peace treaties with Germany, Austria and Hungary in August 1921.

According to MacMillan, articles 231 and 232 came to be the object of “particular loathing” in Germany and the “cause of uneasy consciences” among the Allies.²⁴ Germany regularly defaulted on payments, leading to continuing renegotiations of terms.²⁵ Germany paid off the final sum for reparations, and the interest on loans taken out to pay the debt, in October 2010.²⁶

¹ Alan Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking After the First World War 1919–1923*, 2008, p 1.

² Representatives sent with full powers to negotiate on behalf of their states.

³ Alan Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking After the First World War 1919–1923*, 2008, p 1.

⁴ *ibid*, p 29; and Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*, 2001, p 61.

⁵ Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*, 2001, pp 170–1.

⁶ *ibid*; and Alan Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking After the First World War 1919–1923*, 2008, pp 32–4.

⁷ Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*, 2001, p 180; and Alan Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking After the First World War 1919–1923*, 2008, p 33.

⁸ Alan Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking After the First World War 1919–1923*, 2008, p 33.

⁹ Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*, 2001, p 180; and Alan Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking After the First World War 1919–1923*, 2008, p 33.

¹⁰ Alan Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking After the First World War 1919–1923*, 2008, p 34.

¹¹ *ibid*, p 32; and Kenneth O Morgan, ‘George, David Lloyd, First Earl Lloyd-George of Dwyfor’, *Oxford Dictionary National Biography*, accessed 4 June 2019.

¹² Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*, 2001, p 203.

¹³ Alan Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking After the First World War 1919–1923*, 2008, p 37.

¹⁴ *ibid*; and Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*, 2001, p 476.

¹⁵ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States: The Paris Peace Conference 1919*, vol 6, p 796.

¹⁶ Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*, 2001, p 203.

¹⁷ *ibid*, p 476.

¹⁸ Alan Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking After the First World War 1919–1923*, 2008, p 38.

¹⁹ Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*, 2001, p 482.

²⁰ Alan Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking After the First World War 1919–1923*, 2008, p 39.

²¹ *ibid*, pp 32–4; Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*, 2001, pp 186–92, 203–4 and 490; National Archives, ‘[Reaction to the Treaty of Versailles](#)’, accessed 5 June 2019; United States Department of State, ‘[The Paris Peace Conference and the Treaty of Versailles](#)’, accessed 5 June 2019; and William R Keylor, ‘Versailles and International Diplomacy’ in Manfred F Boemeke et al (eds), *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment After 75 Years*, 1998, p 50.

²² Article 203 of the treaty set up the CMIC to supervise the execution of the military clauses.

²³ Alan Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking After the First World War 1919–1923*, 2008, p 40.

²⁴ Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*, 2001, p 204.

²⁵ National Archives, ‘[Cabinet Papers: Post-war Peace Treaties](#)’, accessed 5 June 2019; and Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*, 2001, p 490.

²⁶ Olivia Lang, ‘[Why has Germany Taken so Long to Pay off its WWI Debt?](#)’, BBC News, 2 October 2010. Olivia Lang provides an overview of the issues Germany faced in paying the reparations and the series of renegotiations that took place.

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