

to default: to fail to pay money owed

M 1 “War Guilt” according to the Treaty of Versailles
Article 231: The Allied governments affirm, and Germany accepts, the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied governments and their peoples have been subjected as a result of war.

John Traynor, Europe 1890–1990, London 1991, p. 108.



M 2 The Kiss of Peace
Caricature by T. Th. Heine from “Simplicissimus”, 1919

The Treaty of Versailles

Paris was the meeting place for the victorious powers to determine the new order in Europe following the First World War. The Treaty of Versailles dealt with the treatment of Germany and provoked great bitterness there.

The peace conference in Versailles lasted from January until June 1919, but Germans were not informed of the treaty’s conditions until an ultimatum was presented to the German delegation on 7 May. Although the country had become a republic in the hope that the peace conditions might be reduced and Wilson’s Fourteen Points had seemed to suggest that milder terms would be possible, this was not the case. The representatives of the three main powers in Paris, Woodrow Wilson (President of the USA), Georges Clemenceau (French Prime Minister), and David Lloyd George (British Prime Minister) refused to make concessions. The German government hesitated over the terms – Chancellor Philipp Scheidemann resigned, saying he would rather see his hand dry up than sign the treaty. The Allies refused to extend a deadline after 23 June and pressured the German government to accept the conditions under threat of the resumption of the war. Finally, a new German delegation to Versailles signed the treaty on 28 June 1919.

The major provisions of the treaty were:
financial

- Germany was made responsible for the outbreak of the war and had to pay reparations (the total sum to be set later), according to Art. 231

territorial

- Alsace and Lorraine were returned to France
- the Saar coalfields were given to France (a plebiscite on national status was set for 1935)
- Eupen and Malmedy were ceded to Belgium
- Posen was ceded to Poland as part of the “Polish corridor”
- regional plebiscites (Schleswig 1920–21, Silesia 1921, Memel 1920, East Prussia 1920) were to determine national status
- Danzig became a Free City under the protection of the League of Nations
- the left bank of the Rhine and a fifty kilometre strip on the right bank were demilitarized (Allied troops to remain for fifteen years)

- union of Germany with Austria was forbidden

colonial

- Germany lost all its colonies (distributed among the Allies)

military

- the German army was reduced to 100,000 men
- the navy and air force were disbanded
- weapons and munitions were destroyed
- German emperor William II was to be turned over to the Allies for trial as a war criminal. In all, Germany lost about ten percent of its population and thirteen percent of its land area.

The League of Nations

President Wilson’s plan to establish world peace called for an international organization to prevent wars in the future. The idea was approved in Paris, and the new League of Nations set up its headquarters in Geneva. However, the US Senate disagreed with Wilson and refused to ratify either the agreement to join the League or the Treaty of Versailles. Communist Russia was not admitted as a member of the League, nor was Germany allowed to join until 1926. Today the League of Nations is considered the forerunner of the United Nations.



M 3 “They shall pay!”
Caricature from “Los Angeles Times”, 1922

M 4 Reparations: A German Legend
British historian Margaret MacMillan estimates the sum of reparations Germany actually paid:

In Germany the Diktat (‘dictated treaty’) took the blame for all that was wrong with the economy:

high prices, low wages, unemployment, taxes, inflation. [...] Germans ignored the fact that 5 fighting the Great War had been expensive, and that losing it had meant they could not transfer the costs to anyone else. They also did not grasp, as most people have failed 10 to do since, that reparations payments never amounted to anything like the huge amounts mentioned in public discussions. [...]

Even with payment schedules that 15 were revised downwards several times, however, the Germans continued to argue that reparations were intolerable. With a rare unanimity in Weimar politics, virtually 20 all Germans felt they were paying too much. Germany regularly *defaulted* on its payments, for the last time and for good in 1932. [...]

In the final reckoning Germany may 25 have paid about 22 billion gold marks (£1.1 billion, \$4.5 billion) in the whole period between 1918 and 1932. That is probably slightly less than what France, with a much smaller economy, paid Germany after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870– 30 1871.
Margaret MacMillan, Peacemakers, London 2001, pp. 490–91.

Tasks

1. Explain the principles behind the new order created by the Treaty of Versailles.
2. Portray the consequences of Germany’s “war guilt” in Article 231 (M1).
3. Interpret the views of the Treaty of Versailles in the caricatures M2 and M3.
4. Assess which of the terms of the Treaty appear to
a) punish Germany
b) improve French security
c) reward the victors.
5. Comment on Margaret MacMillan’s argument regarding German reparations.