German reactions to the Treaty of Versailles

The terms of the Treaty were announced on 7 May to a horrified German nation. Germany was to lose:

- 10 per cent of its land
- all of its overseas colonies
- 12.5 per cent of its population
- 16 per cent of its coalfields and almost half of its iron and steel industry.

Its army was reduced to 100,000 men. It could have no air force, and only a tiny navy.

Worst of all, Germany had to accept the blame for starting the war and should therefore pay reparations.

The overall reaction of Germans was horror and outrage. They certainly did not feel they had started the war. They did not even feel they had lost the war. In 1919 many Germans did not really understand how bad Germany’s military situation had been at the end of the war. They believed that the German government had simply agreed to a ceasefire, and that therefore Germany should have been at the Paris Peace Conference to negotiate peace. It should not have been treated as a defeated state. They were angry that their government was not represented at the talks and that they were being forced to accept a harsh treaty without any choice or even a comment.

At first, the new government refused to sign the Treaty and the German navy sank its own ships in protest. At one point, it looked as though war might break out again. But what could the German leader Ebert do? He consulted the army commander Hindenburg, who made it clear that Germany could not possibly win, but indicated that as a soldier he would prefer to die fighting.

Ebert was in an impossible position. How could he inflict war and certain defeat on his people? Reluctantly, he agreed to accept the terms of the Treaty and it was signed on 28 June 1919.

ACTIVITY

You have been asked to prepare some placards for the protest rally in Source 13.

1. Work in groups to write one placard for each of Germany’s main complaints about the treaty.
2. Then decide which complaint is the most important. That one will be carried at the front of the march.

War guilt and reparations

The ‘war guilt’ clause was particularly hated. Germans felt at the very least that blame should be shared (see Witness 6, page 13). What made matters worse, however, was that because Germany was forced to accept blame for the war, it was also expected to pay for all the damage caused by it. The German economy was already in tatters. People had very little food. They feared that the reparations payments would cripple them.
The Peace Treaties after the First World War

**Source 15**

A cartoon from *Punch* magazine, 1919.

**Source 16**

The Allies could have done anything with the German people had they made the slightest move toward reconciliation. People were prepared to make reparations for the wrong done by their leaders... Over and over I hear the same refrain, 'We shall hate our conquerors with a hatred that will only cease when the day of our revenge comes.'

Princess Bleicher, writing in 1920. She was an Englishwoman married to a member of the German royal family.

**Disarmament**

The disarmament terms upset Germans. An army of 100,000 was very small for a country of Germany's size and the army was a symbol of German pride. Despite Wilson's Fourteen Points calling for disarmament, none of the Allies disarmed to the extent that Germany was disarmed in the 1920s. It is no great surprise that Adolf Hitler received widespread approval for his actions when he rebuilt Germany's armed forces in 1935.

**German territories**

Germany certainly lost a lot of territory. This was a major blow to German pride, and to its economy. Both the Saar and Upper Silesia were important industrial areas. Meanwhile, as Germany was losing land, the British and French were increasing their empires by taking control of German and Turkish territories in Africa and the Middle East.

**The Fourteen Points and the League of Nations**

To most Germans, the treatment of Germany was not in keeping with Wilson's Fourteen Points. For example, while self-determination was given to countries such as Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, German-speaking peoples were being divided by the terms forbidding annexation with Austria or hived off into new countries such as Czechoslovakia to be ruled by non-Germans. Germany felt further insulted by not being invited to join the League of Nations.

**Double standards?**

German complaints about the Treaty fell on deaf ears. In particular, many people felt that the Germans were themselves operating a double standard. Their call for fairer treatment did not square with the harsh way they had treated Russia in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918 (see page 118). Versailles was much less harsh a treaty than Brest-Litovsk.

There was also the fact that Germany's economic problems, although real, were partly self-inflicted. Other states had raised taxes to pay for the war. The Kaiser's government planned to pay war debts by extracting reparations from the defeated states.
The impact of the Treaty on Germany

In 1919 Ebert's government was very fragile. When he agreed to the Treaty, it tipped Germany into chaos. You can read about this in detail on pages 140–41. Ebert's right-wing opponents could not bear the Treaty and they attempted a revolution against him.

This revolution, called the Kapp Putsch, was defeated by a general strike by Berlin workers. The strike paralysed essential services like power and transport. It saved Ebert's government but it added to the chaos in Germany — and the bitterness of Germans towards the treaty.

Worse was yet to come. Germany fell behind on its reparation payments in 1922, so in 1923 French and Belgian soldiers entered the Ruhr region and simply took what was owed to them in the form of raw materials and goods. This was quite legal under the Treaty of Versailles.

The German government ordered the workers to go on strike so that they were not producing anything for the French to take. The French reacted harshly, killing over 100 workers and expelling over 100,000 protesters from the region. More importantly, the strike meant that Germany had no goods to trade, and no money to buy things with.

The government solved this problem by simply printing extra money, but this caused a new problem — hyperinflation. The money was virtually worthless so prices shot up. The price of goods could rise between joining the back of a queue in a shop and reaching the front (see page 143)! Workers needed wheelbarrows to carry home their wages — billions of worthless marks. Wages began to be paid daily instead of weekly.

The Germans naturally blamed these problems on the Treaty. But the truth is more complex. Some say the French acted too harshly (even if the Treaty gave them the right). Others say that the Germans brought the problems on themselves by failing to pay reparations.

SOURCE 17
People coming from the bank with millions of paper marks in suitcases or wheelbarrows. People paying for seats at a theatre with eggs or pats of butter . . . Money that lost half its value in 12 hours. People who had been wealthy trying to sell watches or jewellery for food or articles instead of that bated money. A woman I knew had saved year by year, to assure her son's welfare. Her capital would have bought enough furniture for a decent house. Three months later it would not pay her train fare.

An Englishman who before the war had lent £6000 in marks; when they were repaid, they were worth about £7p in English money. The middle class was wiped out in a matter of weeks.

A German woman describes her problems in 1923; from Vernon Bartlet, Nazi Germany Explained.

SOURCE 18

FOCUS TASK
What was the impact of the Treaty of Versailles on Germany?

It is New Year's Eve 1923. You are a German living in Berlin. As a civilian you survived the shortages and the starvation of the war. You are writing to a friend in America describing what your life has been like since the war ended.

In your letter, tell your friend about:
• the general strike in Berlin in 1920 (see page 141)
• the French and Belgians taking over the Ruhr in 1923
• the awful inflation of 1923.

Explain how each of these problems has been caused by the Treaty of Versailles and how each problem has affected your life. Sources 14-18 will help you. You can also find out a lot more about these events on pages 140–45.

Hände weg vom Ruhrgebiet!

A German cartoon of 1923. The woman represents France. The text means 'Hands off the Ruhr!'
Verdicts on the Treaty of Versailles

In 1919 the Treaty of Versailles was criticised not only by the Germans. As you saw on page 85, none of the Big Three who drew up the Treaty was satisfied with it.

Clemenceau's problem was that it was not harsh enough, and in 1920 he was voted out in a French general election.

Lloyd George received a hero's welcome when he returned to Britain. However, at a later date he described the treaty as 'a great pity' and indicated that he believed another war would happen because of it.

Wilson was very disappointed with the Treaty. He said that if he were a German he would not have signed it. The American Congress refused to approve the Treaty.

Sources 19–22 give you four views from Britain.

SOURCE 19

The historian, with every justification, will come to the conclusion that we were very stupid men. . . . We arrived determined that a Peace of justice and wisdom should be negotiated, we left the conference conscious that the treaties imposed upon our enemies were neither just nor wise.

Harold Nicolson, British diplomat, 1919. He was one of the leading British officials at the Conference.

SOURCE 20

. . . a fair judgment upon the settlement, a simple explanation of how it arose, cannot leave the authors of the new map of Europe under serious reproach. To an overwhelming extent the wishes of the various populations prevailed.

Winston Churchill, speaking in 1919. He had been a member of the government and a serving officer during the war.

SOURCE 21

So . . . could it be justified?

History has shown how the Treaty helped to create a cruel regime in Germany and eventually a second world war. This will always affect modern attitudes to the Treaty. It has certainly affected historians' judgements. They have tended to side with critics of the Treaty. At the time, however, the majority of people outside Germany thought it was fair. Some indeed thought it was not harsh enough. A more generous treaty would have been totally unacceptable to public opinion in Britain or France. Today historians are more likely to point out how hard a task it was to agree the peace settlement. They suggest that the Treaty was the best that could be hoped for in the circumstances.