The Treaty of Versailles, negotiated by the victorious Allies in the wake of the First World War, did not crush Germany, nor did it bring her back into the family of nations. Antony Lentin examines a tortuous process that sowed the seeds of future conflict.

Germany: a New Carthage?

Carthage was left independent and able to recover economically, which eventually it did. Keyes actually seems to have been thinking of the ‘peace’ of 166 BC, when, after the Third Punic War, the Romans slaughtered the inhabitants of Carthage and sold them into slavery, annexing what remained of Carthaginian territory. In The Economic Consequences of the Peace Keynes quoted and endorsed the German view that the ‘Treaty of Versailles’ signalled ‘the death sentence of many millions of German men, women and children’.

The book was widely translated, has never been out of print and has never lost its authority. Its success may be attributed to Keynes’ reputation as an economist and the brilliance with which he conveyed the
discharmament shared by many of his colleagues in the British delegation. Neither the acute and prophetic analysis published soon after, Jacques Bainville’s Les conséquences politiques de la paix (1919), which has never been translated into English, nor the detailed refutation of Keynes by E. J. M. Mansel, The Carthaginian Peace or The Economic Consequences of J. M. Keynes (1944), succeeded in stemming its influence, though while none of Keynes’ predictions were realised almost every one of Bainville’s were. More recent research contained in two collections of scholarly papers has fixed little better. William Kelsey, in his contribution to The Treaty of Versailles 75 Years After (1986), and Tara Stineva in The Treaty of Versailles Revisited, published in The Paris Peace Conference, 1919-1920: Peace without Victory (2002), strove to correct what Stineva calls ‘the misused image of the “Carthaginian” peace’. In The Lights that Failed, European International History 1919-1933 (2005) Stineva repeats that ‘the traditional view of Versailles needs to be abandoned’. But still historians have failed to break the Keynesian spell. Is the accepted image wholly illusory, or does it express an aspect of the truth about the peace treaty?

After the ‘war to end war’ entreaties of late 1918, Allied promises to Germany were few and promises of peace treaties. The opening weeks of the conference were devoted to drafting the constitution, or Covenant, of the League. At the same time a council consisting of the five Allied leaders (of France, Britain, the U.S., Italy and Japan) and their foreign ministers sat through lengthy presentations of territorial claims from spokesmen of the new states. Clemenceau’s object was above all to ensure the future security of France against Germany, which he saw would soon be a threat to revenge. For Lloyd George the priority was reparations, which turned out to be the most time-consuming and divisive of all the problems faced.

was Harold Nicolson, a junior diplomat who later published another classic of disillusionment, Peace-making 1919-1939 (1939). Nicolson recalls the conference resembling a riot in a potter’s house. Fifty-two commissions met in 1,466 sessions to draft reports on subjects ranging from prisoners of war to undersea cables, from the internationalisation of the Kiel Canal to responsibility for the war. All incorporated in a treaty extending to 15 chapters and 440 clauses.

The conference collapsed any other in the scope of the responsibilities it undertook, with the frontiers of a new Europe of nation states to delineate and treaties to conclude with Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey, as well as with Germany. But progress suffered badly from the want of a basic organisational plan. Both Wilson and the British prime minister, David Lloyd George, mistrusted traditional diplomacy, which they believed had contributed to the outbreak of the war.

They and the French premier, Georges Clemenceau, insisted on keeping both the shifting agenda and the content of negotiations in their own hands.

Wilson sought to establish the League of Nations, his panacea for world peace, as part and parcel of the peace treaties. The opening weeks of the conference were devoted to drafting the constitution, or Covenant, of the League. At the same time a council consisting of the five Allied leaders (of France, Britain, the U.S., Italy and Japan) and their foreign ministers sat through lengthy presentations of territorial claims from spokesmen of the new states. Clemenceau’s object was above all to ensure the future security of France against Germany, which he saw would soon be a threat to revenge. For Lloyd George the priority was reparations, which turned out to be the most time-consuming and divisive of all the problems faced.
Nicolson thought the lack of a systematic agenda necessitated the conference from the start. Instead of getting to grips with the long-term challenge of Germany, the powers involved found themselves struggling to cope with the declining health of a moribund minor war and a series of sporadic and short-lived Communist revolts. At the same time they were under domestic pressures to do something with the democratically elected cabinets of ad hoc minor war and several sporadic and short-lived Communist revolutions. At the same time they were under domestic pressures from what Lloyd George called the 'too fierce ardour of an expectant public.' He himself had done much to fan the flames with his electioneers' pledges to 'make Germany pay' and had to return periodically to London to face vociferous backbenchers in his Conservative-dominated coalition. Wilson, too, returned temporarily to Washington for the opening session of a Congress dominated by his isolationist Republican opponents, whose suspicions of the League of Nations he had to allay. Clemenceau was also briefly out of action when an assassination attempt left a bullet in his chest.

Not until the end of March 1919 — fearing that the example of Bolshevism in Russia might prove irresistible to a volatile Europe craving stability, work and bread — did Lloyd George, Wilson, Clemenceau and, to a lesser extent, Prime Minister Orlando of Italy, attempt to grasp the nettle of 'peace with Germany in a race,' said Wilson, 'between peace and annexation.' Accompanied only by interpreters and aides-de-camp and meeting daily in 145 private sessions between late March and June, they took at the main decisions themselves as the Supreme Council or 'Big Four': 'Four men,' said Lloyd George, 'endeavouring to make the world spin round the way it should.'

The Treaty of Versailles conflated all of Germany's losses, possessions and at least a tenth of her territory, population, agricultural land, coal, iron and steel. It reduced her army of half a million conscripts to a volunteer defence force of 100,000 and her feet to little more than a coastal command. It saddled Germany with liability for a vast yet unguaranteed reparations debt, which it would reckoned would take a generation or more to discharge. To compensate France for the definite destruction of her coalfields it transferred the coal-rich Saarland to her for 15 years. All German territory on the left bank of the Rhine and a 50-kilometer strip on the right was declared a demilitarised zone, barred to German troops in perpetuity and placed under Allied occupation for a dozen years. The Treaty also imposed upon the Germans the infamous Versailles 'dictates of shame', notably the projected trial of the ex-Kaiser for 'a supreme crime against international morality' and Article 231, which asserted Germany's liability for the loss and damage caused by her 'aggression'. The Germans immediately denounced this as a 'war guilt clause', which 'stamped the unanimous with the indestructible character of a科技股份 or "knight of shame". Versailles was a dictated peace, or "Diktat." A German delegation was

The whole package of terms was approved unamended by the Big Three without adequate co-ordination or review. In order to meet a self-imposed deadline of May 7th for presentation to the Germans, even on May 9th the details of these "dictates of peace" had not been collated in a single document and assorted sections were still passing to and from the printers. No one had read them in full let alone discussed their cumulative effect. "I hope," said Wilson ingenuously, "that during the rest of my life I will have enough time to read this whole volume." Lloyd George admitted that he only received a complete copy at the last moment. "I don't think in all history this can be matched," commented Sir Henry Wilson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

In his 14 Points Wilson had pledged himself and the Allies to a "peace of justice." This required implementation in Europe of the principle of national self-determination through the creation of nation states and the establishment of a "new world order" as Wilson called it, based on the League of Nations and the re-ordering of international relations under the rule of law. This vision had to be reconciled with the demands of allies who had dispatched blood and treasure for most of the war, while America remained steadfastly neutral. They were not going to be talked out of compensation, security and gains at the expense of a still powerful Germany, which had defeated Russia and come close to victory.

In the Treaty of Versailles, the Allied Powers sought to punish Germany for its role in the First World War by imposing severe economic and political restrictions. The treaty was signed on June 28, 1919, and it officially ended the state of war that had existed between the Allied Powers and Germany. The treaty imposed heavy reparations on Germany, limited its armed forces, and stripped it of its overseas colonies. The treaty was controversial and led to German resentment and eventually to the rise of Nazi Germany and World War II.
Clemenceau, as president of the conference, set the tone with an uncompromising declaration of intent. The time has come for a clean break with the hated negotiations of the past, he told the Germans. There will be no more discussion, no more compromise; the settlement will be imposed.

The German delegation had had another opportunity to view the Weimar Republic and to see the Allies, who knew little about the new Germany, but were only too aware of the need for a political settlement. Unfortunately, the delegation, the foreign minister, Count von Ulrich, and his entourage, made a poor impression. A more sinister-looking man, wrote one observer, than the entire cabinet of the whole Junker system.

Worse still was Brodeck-Rantau's presentation, delivered seated in a rasping tone and a defiant manner. Far from prevailing on the Allies, its effect, as recorded by Philip Kerr, Lloyd George's secretary, was to provoke their anti-German hostility.

At the start of 1919, both countries entered into a fateful sympathy with the Allies, but the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, drafted by the Allies, were far from being acceptable to the Germans. The terms were unacceptable.

Clemenceau was too much of a realist to argue for the defeat of the German people. He knew that the German people would not accept such terms.

Clemenceau himself had witnessed the defeat of 1870. French casualties in the First World War were the highest of all belligerents, as a proportion of the population, one in four Frenchmen between 18 and 27 had perished.

Clemenceau recognized that to impose such terms on the Germans would only lead to a renewed conflict. He was determined to prevent another war.

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Clemenceau hoped, therefore, to conciliate and contain Germany.
Treaty of Versailles

as essential to its strategic and economic wellbeing. Austria was a wholly German state of seven million, but Austria-German unification, or Anschluss, was prohibited since it would make Germany even larger than in 1914. True, neither Austria nor the Sudetenland, both Habsburg dominions, had belonged to Bismarck's Germany, but the fact remained that Sudetenland and Austria wished to unite with the Reich, while the Allies themselves had placed national self-determination at the heart of peace making. There was resentment in Germany that the self-determination granted to others was denied to fellow Germans just across its borders.

Reparations, even when scaled down, helped to make the German economy a slave. Periodic crises over German defaults provoked Allied military incursions beyond the Rhine, culminating in 1923 with the French occupation of the Ruhr. Versailles was seen, inaccurately but obsessively, as Germany's horse-grown ill for inflation, a consequence of the war rather than of the peace for hyperinflation, unleashed by the German government's reckless issue of paper money during the Ruhr crisis and for the six million Germans thrown out of work by the Great Depression of 1929. Even before the Wall Street Crash, on Germany's national day of mourning to mark the 10th anniversary of Versailles, an official manifesto stressed that the war guilt clause "leaves our people no peace of mind. Demands for the evacuation of the Rhineland, the return of the Saar and revision of the Polish frontiers increased in severity. In their written observations on the treaty, the only form of communication with the Allies permitted to them at the conference, the Germans stressed the contractual nature of the pre-Armistice agreement of November 5th, 1918 under which the 14 Points and Wilson's supplementary Principles and Partially constituted the "Wilmso's peace", as they called it, invoking the promises of a peace characterised by "impartial justice for all the parties in the war", by "open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, by their "free acceptance ... by the people involved' and by "ever-handed and dispassionate justice for Germany". Wilson, however, was worn down and ill from the continual strains of the conference, and concluded, by March 1919 that Germany deserved a hard, deterrent peace in view of "its very great offensive against civilization" and that the League of Nations would iron out injustices. Many in the British delegation were noncommittal. "Are we making a good peace?" Nisskon wrote in his diary in early March, "Smuts approached with Lloyd George at the end of the month, insisting the separa tion from Germany of Danzig, the Polish Corridor and the Saarland, "Are we in our sober senses?" he asked, "or suffering from a shell shock? What has become of Wilson's 14 Points?" The German observations confirmed his own:

"They raise the point to the very forefront which I have always considered vital, viz., that we are bound to make a Wilsonian peace, if there is one, within the four corners of the Wilson Points and principles."

Struggles played for radical revision and 'appraisal' - concessions from strength and the removal from the treaty both of major grievances and gratuitous 'pinpricks'. Migrations at Paris were matched by unrest among opinion-formers in Britain. The fundamental question, declared the Manchester Guardian, on May 8th, "is whether we desire a peace of appeasement or a peace of violence". A fortnight later, Randall Davidson, the Arch bishop of Canterbury, proclaimed issuing a public pronouncement to Lloyd George that the effect of the treaty was to 'ask impossibilities', a view in which the prime minister was confirmed by letters he was receiving from 'weary and trustworthy people. He besought the prime minister to bring home a peace 'such that we can ask God's blessing upon it'.

Disillusion intensified among the British delegations. If I were the Germans', wrote Nicolson, "I shouldn't sign for a moment' Boycey resisted in protest and returned to England to confer with the British Government. As the Peace, Smuts put his finger on the cardinal error of the conference and the fundamental flaw of the treaty. 'For the sake of the future' Smuts argued, 'the League of Nations should not be made to sit at the foot of the bayonet ... The treaty should not be capable of more rejection by the German people hereafter. The Allies should ask if we are possible carry the German delegations with us.' He should try to listen to what they have to say. He proposed the appointment of three Allied representatives to meet them in a real discussion and go through the treaty 'as a whole'. In this way he would be proofed of 'all appearance of one-sidedness and unnecessary dictation' and 'its moral authority' would be 'all empty and more hollow'. A most significant episode in the conference took place in Paris over the weekend of Friday July 30th to Sunday August 1st at a series of meetings chaired by Lord George of the British Empire delegation together with most of his coalition colleagues, summoned from London. The purpose of the gathering was to reconsider the treaty in the light of the German observations, which had made a profound impression.

The question proposed was whether German disarmament - the voluntary cession to France of Alsace-Lorraine, subject to a plebiscite; Poland to gain most of the province of Poznow with rights of access to German ports under international guarantee; free deliveries of coal to France and Belgium; direct assistance in redeveloping the devastated areas and an offer on reparations of 10 billion. It required the establishment of a neutral enquiry into war guilt and Germany's immediate admission to the League. The offer was contingent on major concessions, but they were also open to negotiation. For H.A.L. Fisher, historian and minister of education, who took part in these final discussions, they were the 'most brilliant treaty that victors had ever imposed upon conquered' problems of greatest concern, which Lloyd George was authorised to re-open with Wilson and Clemenceau, were Poland's frontiers and the occupation of the Rhineland. It was agreed that reparations should also be reconsidered and that Germany should join the League. Lloyd George, failed, however, to persuade Wilson and Clemenceau. The most he was able to obtain was their agreement to publish Chilindr in and other areas assigned to Poland, cessions which Smuts described as 'paltry' by comparison with the radical revision he thought necessary. "Appraisal" - a readiness to address recognised grievances - took firm root at the conference. At last the last straw was determined not to sign the treaty, when he did, he stated a resolution that the promise of a new international order and a fairer world must be written into this treaty. A month before, many of the British foreign office delegates in Paris had not found what became the Royal Institute of International Affairs. This inaugural meeting was held in an aroused spirit of indignation: 'There is no single person in this room, its chairman, Lord Robert Cecil, declared, 'who is not disappointed with the terms we have drafted.' From 1920, being a Carthaginian peace, the Treaty of Versailles is better understood in the words of Jacques Baudrillard, 'so ugly for its justice. "Undoubtedly very severe indeed, as Woodrow Wilson agreed, it neither crushed Germany nor consoled her. It was a described as a war German could accept as fair or merely binding and which the victors liked the word to enforce. It gave Germany cause for Under the terms of the treaty the German major German population came under Polish rule. Nazi Germany's first act of the Second World War was to reclaim the city.