Peace making 1919–1920

1919 was the year after the Armistice. The First World War had ended. People were thankful that the fighting had stopped, but many people in Britain and France now wanted to punish Germany for the War.

In November [1918] came the Armistice. The news sent me out walking alone...cursing and sobbing and thinking of the dead. Siegfried Sassoon’s famous poem celebrating the Armistice began:

Everybody suddenly burst out singing. And I was filled with such delight... But ‘everybody’ did not include me.

From the autobiography of Robert Graves, who was an officer in the British army during the War.

Last night, for the first time since August in the first year of the war, there was no light of gunfire in the sky, no sudden stabs of flame through darkness, no spreading glow above black trees where for four years of nights human beings were smashed to death. The Fires of Hell had been put out.

From Philip Gibbs, an American newspaper reporter writing from France in November 1918.

1. Look at Source A. How would you describe the mood of the crowd? How might this mood have influenced the politicians who went to Paris to decide the settlement?
2. Do Sources B and C support or contradict the evidence of Source A? Explain your answer.
3. How might you explain the different attitudes shown in these sources?
4. How reliable are sources A, B, and C for deciding how people felt at the end of the War in 1919?

The biggest say as they were the victorious powers.

Russia was not at the meetings because of the Revolution of 1917 and the change of government there (see Chapter 1). Italy and Japan were there as part of the victorious Allied delegation, but did not have such a big say. The defeated powers were all there but they were given very little say in the debates. They were there simply to sign the treaties. Germany hoped for a reasonable settlement. The Kaiser had abdicated and there was now a more liberal government in Germany. But the Paris treaties were not negotiated. The treaties were forced upon the Germans and also on the Austrians, Bulgarians, Hungarians, and the Turks.

From President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, 1918.
The terms of the treaties

Separate treaties were made with each of the defeated countries:

- At Versailles the Allies made a treaty with Germany.
- At St. Germain the Allies made a treaty with Austria.
- At Trianon the Allies made a treaty with Hungary.
- At Neuilly the Allies made a treaty with Bulgaria.
- And at Sevres the Allies made a treaty with Turkey.

These treaties altered borders, reduced the size of their armed forces and agreed reparations. These were payments from one country to another for the damage done in the War. Many new countries were created as a result of these treaties. For example, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia. In the case of Turkey, most of her Empire was lost. In each case the defeated country had little alternative but to accept the Treaty.

The Treaty of Versailles, June 1919

At Versailles the Allies made a treaty with Germany. Germany had to accept the Treaty of Versailles because the Allies still blockaded German ports and thirty-nine divisions of Allied soldiers were on the Rhine ready to invade Germany if necessary. The Treaty of Versailles gave Clemenceau the opportunity to seek revenge for the war. Wilson’s aim of an international association was also met. The League of Nations was to be established (see Chapter 4).
This is what the Treaty of Versailles decided:

- **COLONIES.** German colonies in South, East and West Africa, and in the Far East, were to become Mandates of the League of Nations.

- **DISARMAMENT OF GERMANY.** The German navy had already been confiscated by the British, but the sailors sank their own ships rather than hand them over. The Treaty said that the German navy was to be limited to six small battleships, six cruisers and 12 destroyers. No submarines were allowed. Germany was not allowed to have an airforce. The army could be no more than 100,000 men. Conscription was not allowed. Tanks and heavy guns were banned.

- **REPARATIONS.** Germany and her allies had to accept full responsibility for causing the war. This was called the War Guilt Clause. Germany then agreed to pay for damage done during the war. No figure for this could be fixed in 1919. Instead a Reparations Commission was set up to decide the amount. This figure was eventually fixed at £6,600 million plus interest. Much of this was to be paid in goods, such as coal, and the German merchant fleet was handed over to the Allies.

7 Look at Source E. Describe exactly what the men in the photograph are doing. What does this tell you about the importance of the Treaty of Versailles?

8 Look at the map of Germany (Source G) and at President Wilson’s Fourteen Points. Work out which of the Fourteen Points had affected Germany’s boundaries. What else had affected Germany’s borders? Explain your answer.

9 One of Wilson’s aims was to prevent further wars. Do you think that treating Germany and the other defeated countries this way would help to do this? Give your reasons.

How fairly was Germany treated at Versailles?

This really depends on whether or not you think Germany started the War. If you believe Germany started the War, as Clemenceau did, then it does not seem unreasonable to expect Germany to pay something towards the costs of the damage. Even so, the reparations payments were fixed at such a high level that it was unreasonable for Germany to pay, especially as her economy was ruined, her colonies lost, and much of her industrial capacity confiscated. Alsace and Lorraine had been French, so it could be argued that they were now being returned. But the loss of territory to Poland and Czechoslovakia, land containing many German speaking people, was resented by most Germans. German colonies were now administered by the victorious nations, which looks very much like an unfair gain from the War.

If you believe that Germany was not entirely to blame for the War and that it was more of a shared blame, then the Treaty begins to look very unfair indeed.

10 Make two lists. The first should contain all those parts of the Treaty of Versailles which a French person, in 1919, would think fair and reasonable. The second list should contain everything that a German would think unfair.

11 Is there anything on both lists? Why?

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**The Reckoning.**

From a German newspaper on the day of the signing of the Treaty.
We are under no illusions as to the extent of our defeat and the
degree of our powerlessness. We know that the strength of the
German army is broken. We know the intensity of the hatred
which meets us, and we have heard the victors' passionate
demand that as the vanquished we shall be made to pay, and as
the guilty we shall be punished.
The demand is made that we shall acknowledge that we
alone are guilty of having caused the War. Such a confession
would be a lie. We deny that the people of Germany, who were
convinced that they were waging a war of defence, should be
burdened with the sole guilt of that war.

From the speech made by Count Rantzaus, the head of the German
diplomation at Versailles.

This resentment became focussed on the
German politicians who had authorised
the signing of the Armistice and the Treaty.
They were called the ‘November criminals’
by Hitler who said they had ‘stabbed
Germany in the back’. The reparations
payments were unrealistic. They were too
high even for a strong economy. Germany
found it impossible to pay. The USA had
to lend massive amounts of money to
Germany to help her pay off these
reparations and eventually the payments
had to be reduced. On the other hand,
Germany was still a strong country even
after Versailles, as British historian A.J.P.
Taylor explained in 1969.

Germany remained by far the greatest
power on the continent of Europe. It was
greatest in population – 65 million
against 40 million in France, the only
other major power. German superiority
was greater still in the economic
resources of coal and steel which [equal]
power. Nothing could prevent the
Germans from overshadowing Europe,
even if they did not plan to do so.

From: The Origins of the Second World War by

Some people have argued that the Treaty
of Versailles caused the Second World War,
while others, such as Taylor, say that
Germany was almost bound to present
future problems because it was still such
a strong country. Certainly, Hitler
overturned many of the Versailles decisions
(see Chapter 5), and when German soldiers
invaded Poland in 1939 this led to war.
Though this is not the same as saying
Versailles caused the War.
Hitler could have chosen peaceful
methods to get back German land. Hitler
may have been set on war anyway.
However, in two important ways the
harshness of the Treaty did help to bring
about the Second World War. The
harshness of the War Guilt Clause and the
reparations demands made it easier for
Hitler to gain power in Germany. And the
severe military restrictions and territorial
adjustments meant that some politicians in
Britain were sympathetic to Hitler’s foreign
policy between 1933 and 1938.

Read Source M. What was Rantzaus’s
attitude to the War Guilt Clause of the
Treaty of Versailles?

Why did the German delegation sign
the Treaty if they believed it was unfair?

Use Source M and the knowledge you
have gained from this chapter to explain
your answer.

You are a German politician in 1923.
You know that many Germans resent
the Treaty of Versailles and those
politicians who signed it. Write a short
speech saying what was wrong with
Versailles and what you will do about it if
the people vote for you.

Essays:
I What were the peace makers trying to
achieve at Versailles? Were they
successful?
II Was the Treaty of Versailles a fair
settlement?