

# The Treaty of Versailles

During the early months of 1919 the Big Three argued in Paris about the peace settlement. In June 1919 they finally agreed about how Germany should be treated. This settlement was called the Treaty of Versailles.

## How far did the Big Three get what they wanted?

### The League and self-determination

The peace talks began in January 1919. President Wilson wanted the Conference to set up the League of Nations as one of its first tasks. Britain and France agreed. The rules of the League of Nations were drawn up. These rules were known as the League Covenant. The Covenant was included in the Treaty of Versailles and in all the other peace treaties.

Wilson believed very strongly in self-determination for all peoples. Groups from all over the world made their way to Paris to argue that they should be allowed to set up their own nation-states. People ruled over by the French and British Empires demanded independence. The French and the British were unhappy at this. Wilson gave way to pressure from his allies. The idea of self-determination was not applied to the world empires of France and Britain. People such as Irish and Vietnamese nationalists, who had gone to Paris hoping for independence, left disappointed.

### The mandates

Britain and France wanted control of German and Turkish colonies. The USA wanted these to be run by the League. Finally, a compromise was accepted. The colonies were divided up among the winning powers, but they agreed to look after these territories on behalf of the League of Nations. These lands were to be known as 'mandates' of the League of Nations. Through the mandates, Britain and France added considerably to their world-wide empires. The German colonies in Africa were divided among Britain, France and South Africa.

### SOURCE A



A contemporary painting by William Orpen shows the German delegates signing the Treaty of Versailles. On the opposite side of the table sit Wilson, Lloyd George and Clemenceau, flanked by their assistants.

### SOURCE B

A member of the French delegation at Paris later recalled disagreements among the Big Three.

Then discussions began. Calm and unruffled on most points, bitter and stormy on three of the most important to France: the left bank of the Rhine, the Saar Valley and question of reparations. These three points took up long sittings and led to fierce debates. Mr Lloyd George would arrive at the meeting looking glum and announce, 'They will not sign.' He recommended to his allies a policy of extreme moderation.

André Tardieu, 1921

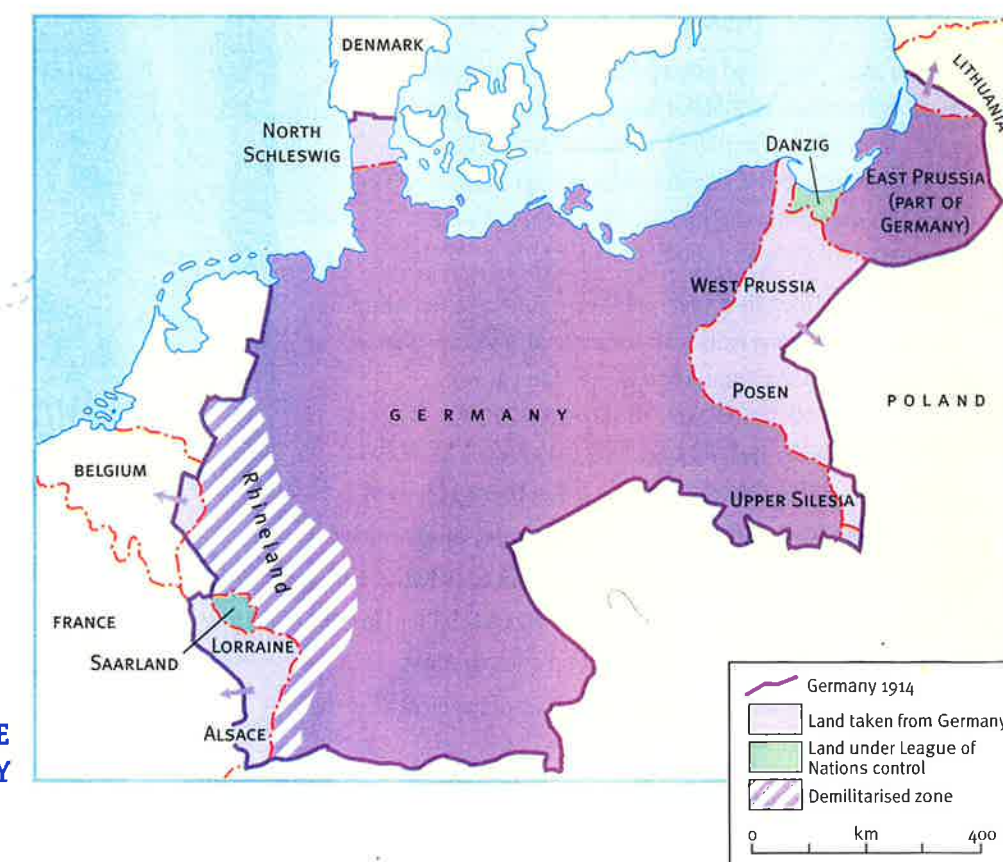
### German loss of territory

In northern Europe new states were set up in Poland, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia. Germany had annexed the three Baltic states from Russia a year earlier. In keeping with the idea of self-determination these small states now became independent. Clemenceau was particularly keen to ensure that Poland was large and powerful. He hoped that a strong Poland would weaken the future position of Germany. The new Poland took territory from Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary. Former German land in West Prussia, Posen and part of Upper Silesia was given to Poland. As a result there was a barrier or corridor of Polish territory that divided most of Germany from the German lands of East Prussia. This Polish Corridor was necessary if Poland was

to have access to the sea in line with Wilson's Fourteen Points. The French wanted the largely German-speaking port of Danzig to be given to Poland. Lloyd George disagreed. Instead Danzig was turned into a 'free city'; this meant that it was not part of any state but was controlled by the League of Nations.

Each of the Big Three agreed that Alsace and Lorraine should be returned to France. Wilson had mentioned the return of Alsace-Lorraine in his Fourteen Points. The French also wanted to annex the nearby coal-rich district of the Saarland. Neither Wilson nor Lloyd George was prepared to give the Saarland to France. Instead it was decided that the area should be run by the League of Nations for 15 years, but during this time the French would have control of its coal-mines. Clemenceau had also wanted the large and wealthy Rhineland area of Germany to be permanently divided from the rest of the German state. A separate Rhineland would weaken Germany and form a barrier between Germany and France. The British and the Americans argued that this would be a mistake. The Germans would be so angry that afterwards they would demand revenge. Clemenceau eventually compromised. The Big Three agreed that no German soldiers should be allowed into the Rhineland and that it should be occupied by allied troops for 15 years.

### VERSAILLES AND THE TREATMENT OF GERMANY





## German losses in Belgium and Denmark

Alsace-Lorraine and the Polish Corridor were the largest losses of German territory. In addition, Germany lost the small districts of Eupen, Moresnet and Malmédy to Belgium. The treaty ordered that there should be a plebiscite or vote in North Schleswig to see whether the local people wanted to stay in Germany or join Denmark. The result of the plebiscite was that North Schleswig became part of Denmark.

The French were successful in arguing that there should be strict limits on the armed forces of Germany. The treaty banned Germany from using tanks and armoured cars. There was to be no German airforce. The German army was limited to a mere 100,000 men. The German navy was to be limited to six battleships and there were to be no German submarines.

## War guilt and reparations

The treaty made it clear that Germany was guilty of causing the First World War. This was stated in Clause 231 of the treaty. The idea of war guilt was used to justify the payment of reparations.

### SOURCE C

*Extracts from the Versailles Treaty:*

Clause 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 nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.

Clause 232 The Allied governments require and Germany undertakes that she will make compensation for all damage done to the civilian population of the Allied powers.

While the Americans agreed to go along with French ideas about war guilt, they differed wildly in their view of the right level of compensation. The French wanted Germany to pay an enormous \$200 billion in reparations, the British argued for \$120 billion and the American view was that the right figure was \$22 billion. In the end the conference failed to agree and set up a Reparations Commission to look into the matter of the level of payment after the Treaty was signed.

### SOURCE D

*The French view of German guilt was reflected in the Allied statement to the German delegation June 1919.*

In the view of the Allied Powers the war which began on August 1 1914, was the greatest crime against humanity and the freedom of peoples that any nation calling itself civilised has ever committed. Germany's responsibility is not confined to having planned and started the war. She is no less responsible for the savage and inhuman manner in which it was conducted. The conduct of Germany is almost unexampled in human history. No less than seven million dead lie buried in Europe because Germany saw fit to go to war. There must be Justice for the dead. There must be Justice for the people who now stagger under war debts. There must be Justice for those millions whose homes and lands German savagery has spoiled and destroyed.

### SOURCE E



*The treaty insisted that Germany should be largely disarmed. Here a German tank is dismantled in order to comply with the treaty.*

## Why did Wilson accept the treaty?

The American leader was unhappy with much of the treaty. Many British leaders were also concerned that the treaty was too hard on Germany. They went along with it because they thought the problems of the treaty could be sorted out at a later date. Wilson put much faith in the League of Nations. He thought that this organisation would be able to solve any arguments between countries.

### SOURCE F

*On 14 February 1919 Wilson wrote to his wife expressing his delight that the French and British had agreed to the setting up of the League of Nations.*

*This is our first real step forward. For I now realise, more than ever before, that once established, the League can arbitrate and correct mistakes which are in the treaty.*

## THE 14 POINTS AND THE PEACE TREATIES COMPARED

### Achieved in full

- 7 Germany to leave Belgium
- 8 Alsace-Lorraine to be returned to France
- 10 Independence for the peoples of Austria–Hungary
- 13 Independence for Poland

### Partially achieved

- 9 Italian borders to be settled
- 11 Invading armies to leave Balkans
- 14 An effective League of Nations to keep the peace

### Not achieved

- 1 A ban on secret treaties between states
- 2 Free movement of ships anywhere in the world
- 3 Free trade between countries without import taxes
- 4 General disarmament
- 5 Greater independence for colonies
- 6 Non-interference in Russia
- 12 Independence for the non-Turkish people of the Turkish Empire.

## >> Activity

Look back at what the Big Three wanted to achieve at the Paris peace talks. Read the information in this unit and work out how far Wilson and Clemenceau were successful in getting what they wanted.



# The other peace treaties



*Tómaš Masaryk, the first President of the Czechoslovak state created from the lands of the former Austria-Hungary.*

The Paris peace conference was not simply concerned with Germany. The Big Three also made important decisions about the future of Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and the Turkish Ottoman Empire. All these states had been on the losing side during the First World War. The plans for these territories were stated in a series of treaties signed between 1919 and 1923. All of the treaties included reference to the League of Nations as the organisation which would solve future problems between states. All of the defeated countries were initially ordered to pay reparations.

## SAINT-GERMAIN: THE TREATY WITH AUSTRIA 1919

The peace settlement dealt with the two parts of Austria-Hungary in separate peace treaties. The agreement with Austria was known as the Treaty of St Germain and was signed in September 1919.

### Terms of the treaty

Austria lost the South Tyrol and Istria to Italy and huge areas of land to three new states: Czechoslovakia, Poland and Yugoslavia.

The lands given to Czechoslovakia included some of Austria's wealthiest territories and over 3 million German speakers were placed in the new state.

Austria was reduced to a small mountainous country of 6.5 million people. A third of the population lived in the great city of Vienna.

Austria was forbidden from ever seeking unification or 'Anschluss' with Germany.

The Austrian army was limited to 30,000 men.

## NEUILLY: THE TREATY WITH BULGARIA 1919

Bulgaria had also fought on the losing side. The Treaty of Neuilly was signed in November 1919.

### Terms of the treaty

Land was taken from Bulgaria and given to Greece, Yugoslavia and Romania.

The Bulgarian army was restricted to no more than 20,000 men.

## TRIANON: THE TREATY WITH HUNGARY 1920

While the peace talks were taking place, Hungarian communists seized power in Budapest led by Béla Kun. The signing of a peace treaty was delayed until Béla Kun had been overthrown and a right-wing government took over. The new ruler of Hungary, Admiral Horthy, was forced to sign the Treaty of Trianon in March 1920. The idea of self-determination led to the carving up of the old Hungary.

### Terms of the treaty

Two thirds of Hungarian territory was given to Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania.

The population of Hungary was reduced by these changes from 18 million to 7 million people.

The Hungarian army was limited to 35,000.

## SÈVRES: THE TREATY WITH TURKEY 1920

The Ottoman family had ruled over a powerful Turkish Empire for many centuries. The Ottoman Empire had been in decline in the years before the First World War. The Turks fought on the losing side in the war.

### Terms of the treaty

Turkey lost nearly all its land in Europe to Greece.

The lands of the Turkish Empire in the Arab Middle East were confiscated: France took charge in Syria and Britain took control in Palestine, Jordan and Iraq.

Turkey was to pay reparations.

## LAUSANNE: REVISING THE TURKISH TREATY 1923

Many Turkish people were outraged by the treaty. A general known as Atatürk led a revolution and overthrew the Ottoman family in 1921. Once in power Atatürk used his armies to overturn the Treaty of Sèvres by force. As a result a new agreement, the Treaty of Lausanne, was signed in 1923.

### Terms of the treaty

Turkey regained much of the land lost to Greece.

No reparations were to be paid.



THE DISMEMBERMENT OF AUSTRIA-HUNGARY AND TURKEY

## Discussion points

- > What evidence is there that the winners tried to punish the losers through these treaties?
- > How do you think the people of these countries reacted to news of these treaties?



# Aftermath: the immediate

The peace treaties of 1919–23 created a new Europe. As the treaties were carried out, many problems emerged. There was political turmoil across central and Eastern Europe.

## What was the immediate impact of the treaties?

### The Weimar Republic

Defeat and the peace treaty brought chaos to Germany. In 1919 a new government was set up in the town of Weimar, and it became known as the Weimar Republic. The new government was attacked on all sides. Between 1919 and 1923 there were repeated attempts by both left-wing and right-wing militants to overthrow the new Weimar Republic. In January 1919 communist revolutionaries, called Spartacists, tried to stage a revolution in Berlin. In April communists tried to seize power in Munich. Both of these rebellions were smashed by armed and violent groups of ex-servicemen known as 'Freikorps' (Free Corps). In 1920 a Freikorps force attempted to seize Berlin. The army sympathised with the Freikorps and refused to fight them. This attempt at a right-wing revolution was eventually stopped by a strike by left-wing workers.

Attempts to pay the reparations bill after 1921 added to Germany's economic problems and helped to cause a huge level of inflation. At the same time a new political crisis created economic problems. The French invaded the Ruhr area in January 1923, on the grounds that the Germans were not paying their reparations. This was the centre of German industry. Germans responded with strikes – but this had the effect of doing more damage to Germany than to France.

The economic situation went out of control in 1923; inflation made banknotes virtually worthless. This was known as hyper-inflation. Pensioners lost their life savings. On 20 November 1923 one American dollar was worth 4 billion German marks.

### SOURCE A



*Hyper-inflation in Germany, 1923. A child plays with huge, worthless bundles of banknotes.*

Another right-wing attempt to seize power was launched in November 1923. The leader of this rebellion was a militant nationalist called Adolf Hitler. The rebellion ended in fiasco in Munich after a few of Hitler's followers had been shot. Hitler was dealt with leniently and was imprisoned for a short time. By this time the economy of Germany had begun to recover and it seemed that stability was beginning to return to the country.

### >> Activity

Describe in your own words how the Treaty of Versailles led to chaos in Germany.

# consequences of the treaties

### TROUBLE IN EASTERN EUROPE

#### Anger in Hungary

The peace treaties created great bitterness and instability in Hungary. As in Germany, left-wing and right-wing militants tried to seize power. In 1919 the communist Béla Kun briefly set up a Soviet-style government. He was overthrown and Admiral Horthy, a right wing military dictator, came to power. He remained in charge until the Second World War. Under Horthy there was no democracy in Hungary.

Hungarians were horrified by the terms of the Trianon Treaty. Before the First World War Hungarians had controlled a huge, multi-national empire in Eastern Europe. In 1920 Hungary lost two-thirds of its pre-war territory. The lost land was given to Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. In each of these countries there was a Hungarian minority. After 1920 Hungarian foreign policy was completely dominated by a wish to 'get back' the lost lands. As a result, Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia felt threatened. The governments of these three countries formed an alliance in order to protect themselves from the threat of a Hungarian invasion. This became known as the Little Entente.

#### Ethnic tension in Czechoslovakia

Czechoslovakia was the only new state in Eastern Europe that allowed free speech and democracy. There was great tension between different ethnic groups. The Czechs of the western part of the country were wealthier than the Slovaks of the east. Slovaks complained that they were treated as second-class citizens. Only 65 per cent of the population were Czechs or Slovaks. There were over 3 million Germans, known as the Sudeten Germans, and in many border areas the Germans were in a majority. Like the Slovaks, some Sudeten Germans said that they were not treated fairly by the Czechs.

### War and revolution in Poland

Poland, with 30 million people, was by far the largest of the states set up by the treaties. The new Polish state was immediately involved in a series of brief wars with most of its neighbours. The Poles were not content with the borders set up in the peace treaties. Between 1918 and 1921 Poland fought against Germany, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania and the Soviet Union. These wars showed how difficult it was to impose the terms of the peace treaties. In 1920 the Poles defied the treaties and took control of the Lithuanian city of Vilna. By 1921 Poland had conquered a huge area of Belarus and Ukraine from the Soviet Union.

Polish politics were chaotic in the early 1920s. It seemed impossible to form a stable government and the country was close to civil war. The chaos came to an end in May 1926 when Marshal Pilsudski seized power and ended democracy in Poland.

### >> Activity

How successful were the treaties in the new states of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland? Describe in your own words the consequences of the peace treaties in each of these countries.



# A harsh treaty?

The Germans were horrified at what they saw as the harshness of the peace treaty. They had hoped for milder terms in line with the Fourteen Points. There has been a lively argument since 1919 about the fairness of the Treaty of Versailles.

## Was the Treaty of Versailles fair?

Germans had difficulty coming to terms with defeat. They had been proud of their army and were surprised and upset when Germany was defeated. Some said that people inside Germany – Jews, socialists and communists – had deliberately organised the surrender. They talked about the ‘stab in the back’. The politicians who signed the armistice were called the ‘November criminals’. Those Germans who felt that their country had been betrayed were appalled by the treaty. The section of the Versailles Treaty that most angered people in Germany was Clause 231 describing German ‘war guilt’. They felt that it was wrong to put the entire blame for the war on their country. The payment of reparations was also deeply resented.

The Big Three had not allowed Germany to negotiate the treaty. The Germans were simply given the treaty and forced to sign it. This lack of discussion and consultation angered Germans who called it a ‘diktat’: a dictated peace.

The loss of German land was a severe blow. The fact that East Prussia was now separated by the Polish Corridor seemed unfair. Germans also resented bitterly the loss of their colonies in Africa.

### SOURCE A

Count Brockdorff, the leader of the German delegation at Paris, set the tone for the national response to the treaty on 7 May 1919.

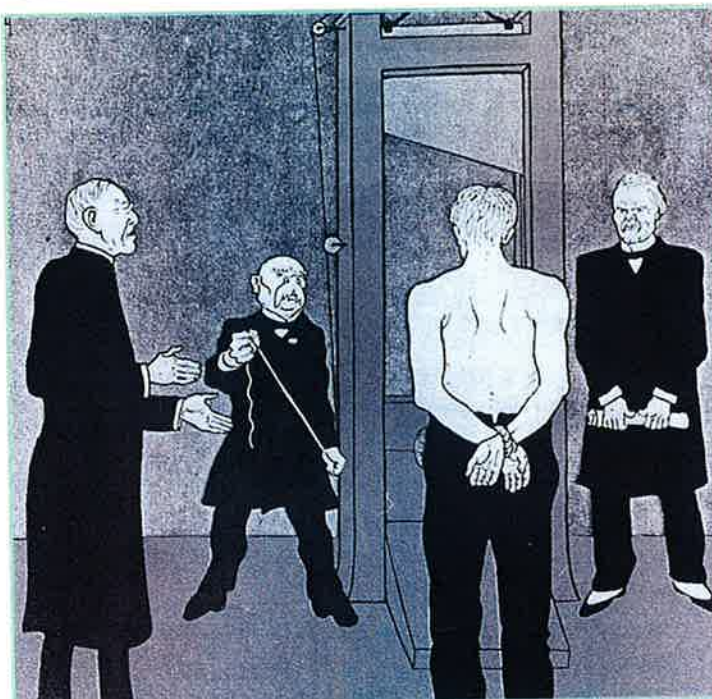
We are told that we should acknowledge that we alone are guilty of having caused the war. I would be a liar if I agreed to this. We are not trying to avoid all responsibility for this World War. However, we emphatically deny that the German people should be seen as the only guilty party. Over fifty years the imperialism of all European states has poisoned the international situation.

### SOURCE B

Adolf Hitler was an obscure German corporal at the end of the war. In 1925 he expressed a common German view of the Treaty.

What I would like to do with the Treaty of Versailles! Each one of the points of that treaty is branded in the minds and hearts of the German people and sixty million men and women find their souls aflame with a feeling of rage and shame. A torrent of fire bursts forth as from a furnace, and a will of steel is forged from it, with the common cry – ‘We will have weapons again!’

### SOURCE C



A German cartoonist sums up the common German view of the treaty. Wilson and Lloyd George look on as Clemenceau prepares to guillotine a figure representing Germany.

### Conflicting interpretations

Some of the people on the winning side also thought that Versailles was quite wrong. One non-German critic of the Versailles Treaty was John Maynard Keynes. He had been a British official at Paris and later he became a very famous economist. Keynes left the Conference early, disgusted at the treatment of Germany. In 1920 he wrote a famous attack on the Treaty of Versailles. His book, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, was widely read. Many people in Britain, the USA and Germany agreed with Keynes.

### SOURCE E

John Maynard Keynes writing in 1920:

In my own opinion, it is not possible to lay the entire responsibility for the war on any single nation. By aiming at the destruction of the economic life of Germany this treaty threatens the health and prosperity of the Allies themselves. By making impossible demands it leaves Europe more unsettled than it found it.

### SOURCE D



THE TIGER: “Curious! I seem to hear a child weeping!”

Between 1920 and 1939 many writers and politicians in Britain and the USA agreed with the view of Keynes. As a result politicians, particularly in the British government, were ready to make concessions to Germany to try to improve on a flawed treaty. Since 1950 most historians have disagreed with Keynes and have taken a more sympathetic view of the treaty.

### SOURCE F

A modern historian, Sally Marks, summed up her view of the Versailles Treaty in 1976.

The Versailles Treaty was severe, but it is amazing that it was not more so. Thanks to Wilson’s insistence, Germany lost remarkably little territory, considering how thoroughly she had lost the war. True the colonies were gone, but the European losses were relatively modest. The real difficulty was not that the Treaty was exceptionally severe but that the Germans thought it was, and in time persuaded others that it was.

A cartoon produced in 1919 by the British artist, Will Dyson, predicts that the treaty was flawed and would lead to another world war. As the leaders of France, the USA, Italy and Britain leave the peace conference they notice a small child crying because he will have to fight in a future war. Prophetically, the cartoonist suggests that the next war might happen in 1940.



# The peace treaties of 1919–23

## Activity

Keynes thought the treaty was unfair. Marks thought that it was fair.

- 1 Look at the points in the table. Work out which points fit in with the argument of Keynes and which ones fit in with the more recent view of Sally Marks.
- 2 Using these points and your wider knowledge explain whether you think that the Treaty of Versailles was unfair.

## SOURCE G



Clemenceau, Wilson and Lloyd George at the peace conference.  
 > Was their treatment of Germany fair?

## ASSESSING THE TERMS OF THE TREATY

- > It was wrong to put the sole blame for the war on Germany. Other countries had been aggressive in the years leading up to 1914. One of the causes of the war was imperialism; many countries, including Britain and France, had tried to build up world empires.
- > The settlement removed only limited amounts of land from Germany. In places like Alsace-Lorraine and the Polish Corridor most people were not German-speakers and saw themselves as French or Polish.
- > The treaty was unfair because it punished the people of Germany instead of the rulers of Germany. Reparations hurt ordinary Germans who were not guilty.
- > German statements about the Fourteen Points were hypocritical. When Wilson described them in a speech in January 1918 the Germans made no reply. They only took the Fourteen Points seriously much later in the year when they had been beaten and were looking for the best possible terms. When Wilson was talking about the need for a just peace the Germans were busy defeating the Russians and imposing a brutal peace treaty on them. When they were winning, the Germans ignored fairness; when they were losing they demanded it.
- > Germany was tricked because her government had been offered justice and fairness by Wilson when he made his speech about the Fourteen Points. When the Germans stopped fighting they expected to be dealt with under Wilson's terms. There was nothing about war guilt and reparations in the Fourteen Points.
- > The treaty aimed to destroy the economy of Germany. This was a mistake that would do no-one any good. People throughout Europe would lose out if there were no successful German factories and businesses.
- > The basic strength of the German economy was not destroyed by the Treaty of Versailles. Germany soon recovered its position as the most successful economy in Europe. In 1925 Germany was producing twice as much steel as Britain.
- > The German Army was reduced in size but the leaders of the German Army were not removed. The army remained a powerful force in German society. The generals were ready and able to re-build German armed forces when the time was right.

## THE BIG THREE

The winners gathered in Paris in 1919 to decide on the future of Europe. The leaders of the victorious countries each had different objectives:

- > **Woodrow Wilson, the US President**, wanted a fair peace. During the war he had called for a fair settlement in his famous Fourteen Points speech (January 1918). The USA had suffered much less than its allies in loss of life and economic damage. He accepted that Germany must be punished but he did not want this to be too harsh. He believed in self-determination – that every nation should have its own government.
- > **Clemenceau, the French Premier**, called for harsh treatment of Germany. Much of the war had been fought in France and the level of damage was enormous. His aim was to weaken Germany so much that it would never again try to dominate Europe.
- > **Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister**, wanted a middle ground between the French and American positions. He was more interested in the British Empire than events in Europe.

## THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES 1919

This dealt with the future of Germany.

**Germany was forced to disarm.** The army was limited to 100,000. Tanks were banned and the navy was limited to six warships. German troops were banned from the Rhineland area, bordering France.

**The territory of Germany was reduced.** Alsace-Lorraine was returned to France. Poland gained West Prussia, Posen and part of Upper Silesia; Danzig was to be controlled by the League of Nations. A 'corridor' of Polish territory separated East Prussia from the rest of Germany. Small territories were given to Belgium, Denmark and Lithuania. The coal-rich Saarland was put under League of Nations control for 15 years and the coal mines were handed over to France for this period. Germany was forbidden from ever uniting with Austria. German colonies were confiscated.

**Germany was ordered to pay huge compensation** or 'reparations' to the winning powers. These payments were justified on the grounds that Germany was guilty of starting the war. A war guilt clause was included in this treaty.

## THE OTHER PEACE TREATIES

Other treaties signed at the end of the First World War

- > The Treaty of St Germain 1919 with Austria
- > The Treaty of Neuilly 1919 with Bulgaria
- > The Treaty of Trianon 1920 with Hungary
- > The Treaty of Sèvres 1920 with Turkey. This was revised in 1923 and replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne.