

Were the peace treaties of 1919–23 fair?

In January 1919 representatives from 32 countries met in Paris for a conference that would make the peace settlement at the end of the First World War. The tasks they faced were huge. The Europe of 1914 had been swept away by the impact of war. Nobody knows how many died in the war – at least 8 million fighting men and a further 8 million civilians is a reasonable guess. The Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires had collapsed, the former replaced by an unpredictable communist dictatorship pledged to destroy capitalism throughout the world. Large areas were left devastated by the fighting, and the European economy was shattered by the costs of war.

In these circumstances, to agree a peace settlement that everyone, victors and defeated, found fair and acceptable would have been an impossible task. What is remarkable is that the peacemakers achieved as much as they did. The peace treaties made with the defeated nations in 1919–20 redrew the map of Europe, set up the League of Nations – the first international organisation for maintaining world peace – and brought freedom to many ethnic groups previously under foreign rule.

What were the motives and aims of the 'Big Three' at Versailles?

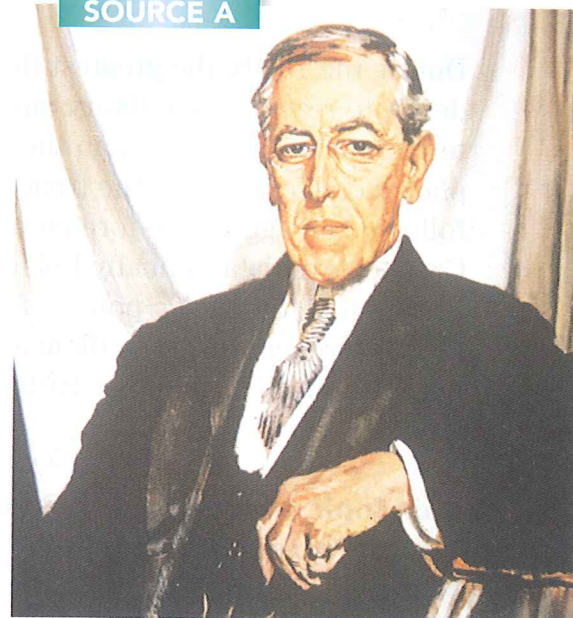
Of the nations that assembled in Paris to make peace, three possessed the power to make decisions which, more often than not, the others would have to accept. These were the great powers that had won the war: the USA, France and Britain. They were represented at the peace conference by President Wilson, and prime ministers Clemenceau and Lloyd George, known collectively as the 'Big Three'. Italy and Japan were the other members of the Council of Ten (there were two members from each of the five powers), which met daily at the conference to take all the important decisions.

The 'Big Three' had very different ideas about the peace settlement. The traditional interpretation of their relationship is that Wilson was the unworldly idealist, whose plans were undermined by the unscrupulous Europeans; that Clemenceau was cunning and cynical, determined that France should have its revenge on Germany; and that Lloyd George acted as a balance between the other two, doing his

QUESTIONS

- 1 Why was it so difficult to make a peace settlement which would please everyone?
- 2 How were the important decisions made during the peace conference?
- 3 What were the main differences in the aims of the 'Big Three'?

SOURCE A



Woodrow Wilson (President of the USA, 1913–21).

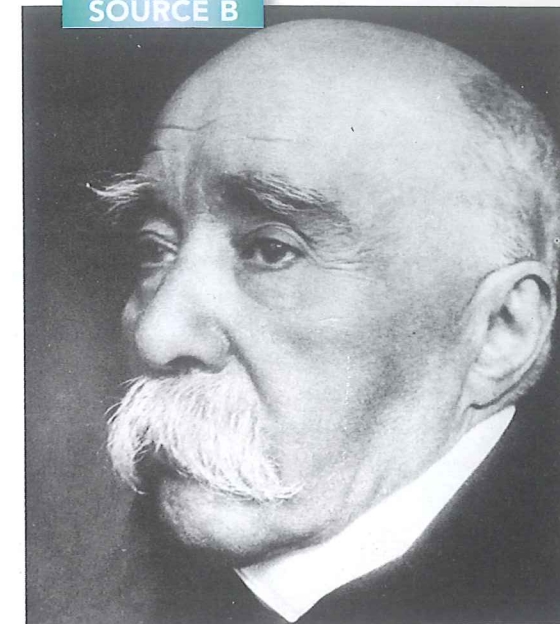
best to make the treaty less harsh on Germany. Although this interpretation is in some ways valid, the truth is more complicated.

Once the conference met, all three came to realise that compromises would be necessary. They frequently and strongly disagreed. All got their way on some issues, and failed to do so on others. Although he championed the rights of different nationalities to rule themselves, in dealing with Italy's and Japan's territorial demands Wilson was prepared to give way and to ignore this principle of self-determination. Had he not done so, they would have refused to sign the treaties. Lloyd George fought hard to keep German territorial losses to a minimum, and argued for more German border areas to be given plebiscites (a vote on which country to join), but he was also capable of insisting on increases in reparations payments to suit British interests. When Clemenceau insisted on the German frontier being pushed back to the Rhine, Wilson threatened to quit the conference and return home. The French had to be satisfied with the demilitarisation of the Rhineland. But like all compromises, the final treaties satisfied nobody.

Wilson was a man of strong principles, who found it hard to accept other people's views. At first, he kept the USA out of the war, until by 1917 he had become convinced that 'to make the world safe for democracy' the USA would have to fight the Germans. However, once the war was won, Wilson wanted a fair settlement that would guarantee future world peace. In January 1918 he outlined his 'Fourteen Points', the principles that he believed should guide peacemaking when the war ended (see page 53). The most important was self-determination – people of different national groups had the right to rule themselves.

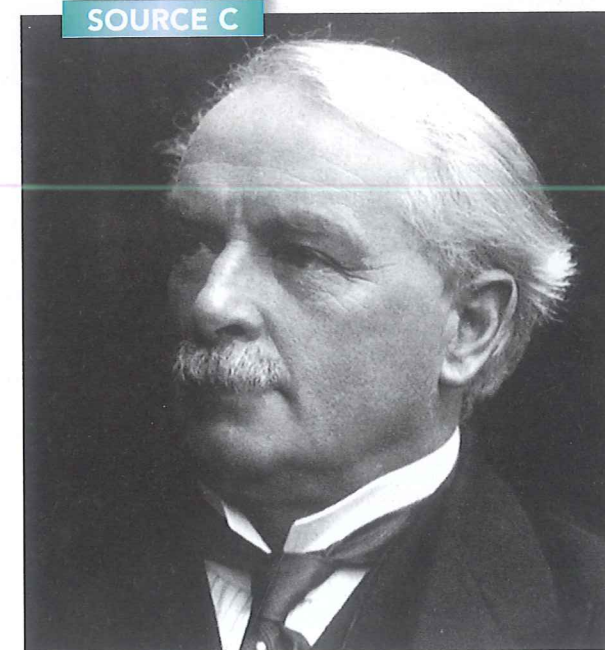
At Paris, Wilson tried to have every decision debated by all 32 nations. But this was too slow, and most nations were interested only in their own problems. Wider issues had to be decided by the great powers. Wilson was increasingly forced to compromise on his Fourteen Points, and had to place his hopes in the new League of Nations to put right any problems with the peace treaties. Wilson's authority was weakened by lack of support for his ideas in the USA. Many Americans were determined never to be dragged into Europe's

SOURCE B



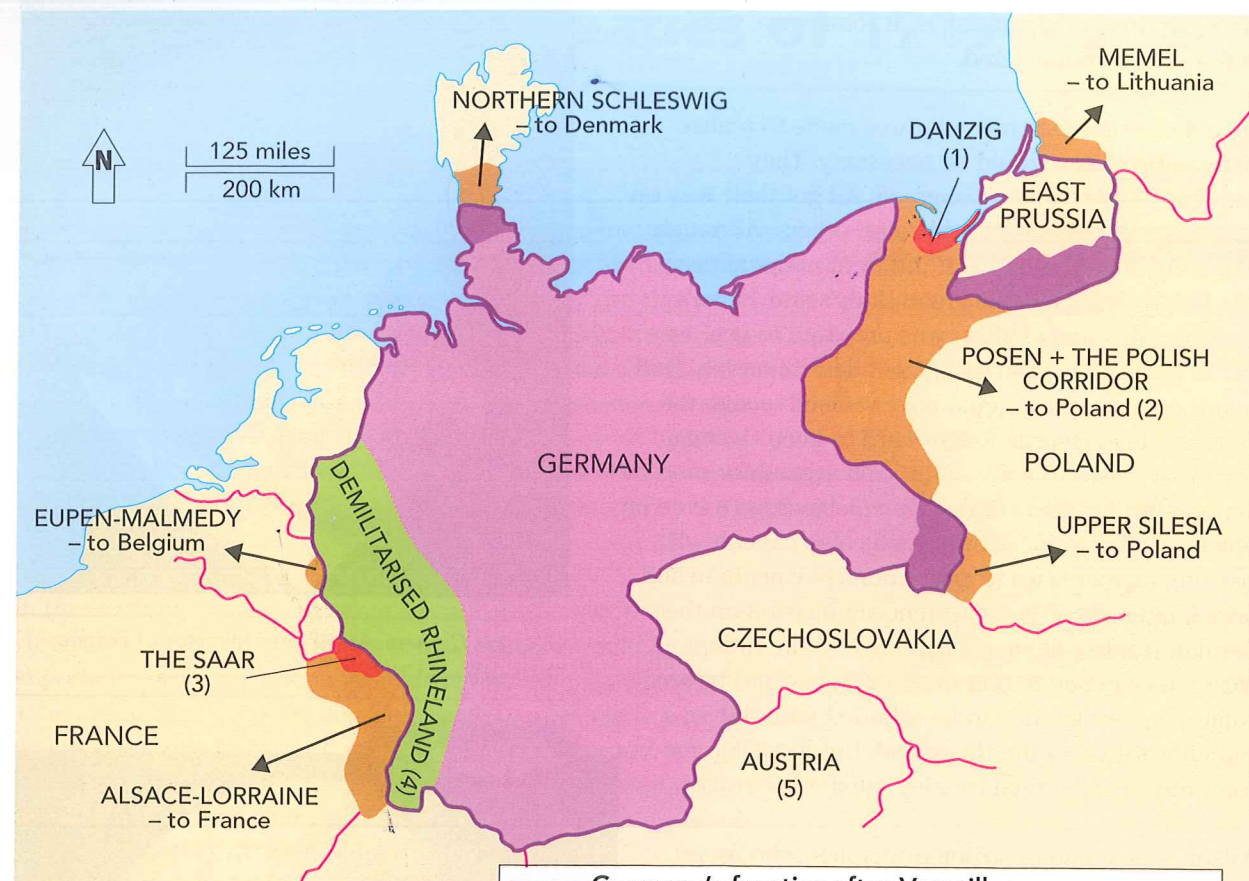
Georges Clemenceau (Prime Minister of France, 1917–20).

SOURCE C



David Lloyd George (Prime Minister of Britain, 1916–22).

troubles again. Electoral gains made by his opponents at home meant that whatever he agreed in Paris might be rejected. In March 1920 the US Senate finally failed to give the majority needed for the peace treaties to be ratified.



- (1) DANZIG was made a free city under League of Nations control. Poland could use the port for its external trade.
- (2) THE POLISH CORRIDOR gave Poland access to the sea. It also split East Prussia from the rest of Germany.
- (3) THE SAAR was put under League of Nations control for fifteen years. France was given the production of the Saar coalfields as part of reparations payments.
- (4) THE RHINELAND was to be permanently demilitarised by Germany. It would be occupied by the Allies for fifteen years.
- (5) ANSCHLUSS (union) between Germany and Austria was forbidden.

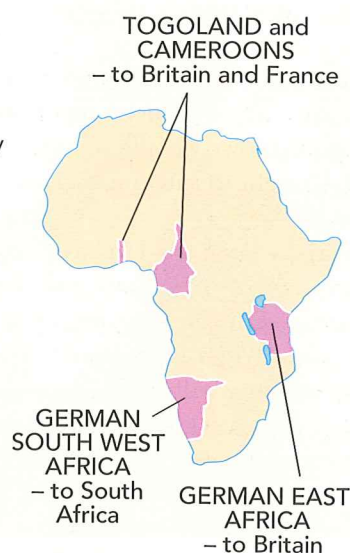
Germany's frontier after Versailles
 Areas lost by Germany to other countries
 Areas lost by Germany to the League of Nations
 Areas kept by Germany after plebiscites
 Demilitarised zone

Germany's colonial losses

Germany's colonies in Africa were given to the victorious powers as mandates. This means they were governed by one of the victorious powers until they were ready for independence.

Germany's colonies in the Pacific were also allocated as mandates.

- New Guinea – to Australia
- Samoa – to New Zealand
- Pacific islands north of the Equator – the Marshalls, Marianas and Carolines – to Japan



Clemenceau became French prime minister in 1917 when defeat in the war seemed a real possibility. He rallied the country, and led it to victory. As chairman of the peace conference, he was personally willing to compromise in order to find a settlement acceptable to all the victorious powers, but he knew what his countrymen expected. France had borne the brunt of the fighting on the Western Front. Much of north-east France was devastated. The Germans had systematically looted areas under their occupation, and deliberately destroyed mines, railways, factories and bridges during their retreat. The French expected Germany to pay for this destruction, and wanted to ensure that Germany could never invade France again.

Like the other conference participants, Clemenceau found it hard to achieve his aims. Neither Britain nor the USA shared France's enthusiasm for punishing Germany. Still less did they want to provide guarantees for French security in future. Clemenceau's demand for the German frontier to be pushed back to the Rhine was bluntly rejected. France was not given the Saar, although it did receive its coal production for fifteen years. The reparations issue was referred to a commission, which did not report until 1921. When the terms of the Treaty of Versailles became known, it was condemned throughout France. Within a few months, Clemenceau's government was overthrown and his political career ended.

Lloyd George and the treaty

Lloyd George became leader of Britain's coalition government in 1916. In December 1918 his government won a massive election victory by promising to 'squeeze the German lemon till the pips squeak'. The British blamed the Germans for the war and wanted to make them pay; some even suggested that the Kaiser should be hanged. Lloyd George probably knew early on that a harsh peace would store up trouble, but he was constrained by British public opinion and election promises.

Lloyd George was determined to preserve Britain's interests as the greatest naval power. He disliked Wilson's idea of 'freedom of the seas', which was referred to the League of Nations for discussion. He also wanted the German fleet sunk – a matter that the Germans resolved by sinking all their ships, held captive at Scapa Flow. By the completion of the treaty, however, British public opinion was shifting, and Lloyd George was prepared to make some amendments to the terms. As a trading nation, Britain knew that German recovery was essential to the European economy, and that large reparations payments would make this impossible. The British were not prepared to help France keep Germany weak.

The Fourteen Points

- 1 No secret treaties.
- 2 Freedom of the seas.
- 3 The removal of economic barriers.
- 4 The reduction of armaments.
- 5 Settlement of all colonial claims.
- 6 Germans to leave Russian territory and a settlement of all questions affecting Russia.
- 7 Germans to leave Belgium.
- 8 French territory freed and Alsace-Lorraine returned to France.
- 9 Italian frontiers adjusted to take into account the nationality of the population.
- 10 The peoples of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to be given self-determination.
- 11 Germans to leave Romania, Serbia and Montenegro and international guarantees of their independence to be given.
- 12 The people of the Ottoman Empire to be given self-determination, and the Dardanelles to be permanently opened to international shipping.
- 13 An independent Polish state to be created with access to the sea.
- 14 A general association of nations to be formed to give guarantees of political independence to great and small states alike.

The terms of the Treaty of Versailles, June 1919.

This was the treaty signed by the Allies with Germany.

War Guilt

Germany had to accept the blame for the war.

Article 231 of the treaty:

'Germany accepts responsibility for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied governments have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany.'

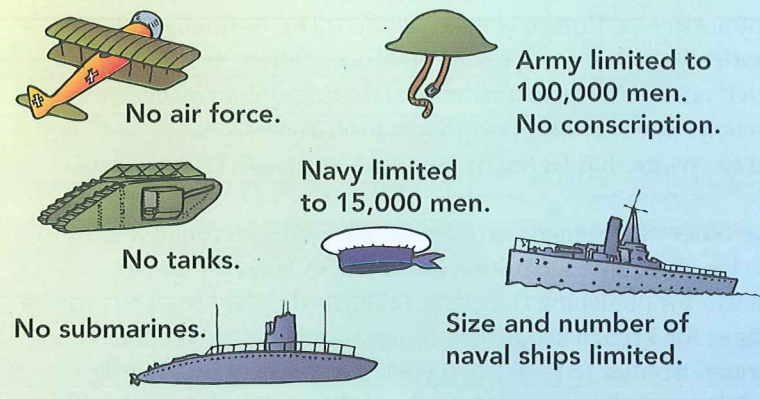
Reparations

As Germany accepted the blame for the war, the Allies could demand payment for all the damage caused. Germany was required to pay compensation – reparations – to the Allies.

A Reparations Commission was set up to fix the amount. It reported in 1921. Germany was presented with a demand for £6600 million.

Military restrictions

Tight restrictions were placed on Germany's armed forces.



The League of Nations

The first item in all the peace treaties with the defeated nations was the 'Covenant' (the rules) setting up the League of Nations.



Why did all of the victors not get everything they wanted?

According to the British historian R. Henig, 'The Treaty represented an uneasy compromise between Wilson's idealism, French security requirements, and British pragmatism [common sense]. The British and French would not accept Wilson's vision of a new international order based on the Fourteen Points, and the British and the Americans would not back up France in making a peace that would keep Germany weak. To make matters worse, the British very quickly came to see the Treaty of Versailles as a mistake. Quite clearly, none of the victors got the peace they wanted, not

least because they all wanted a different kind of peace. However, even when the nations first assembled in Paris, they were not free to shape the peace as they wished. Four important factors limited their freedom of action.

1 Wartime commitments and secret treaties

While the war was going on, a number of promises of territory were made to certain countries to encourage them to fight. Now that the war was over, these nations would expect the promises to be kept. Italy had joined the war on the Allies' side after the secret Treaty of London (1915) was signed, promising it a share in any partition of the Ottoman Empire or of German colonies, as well as

significant areas of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Japan's claims on China and parts of the German Pacific Empire had also been supported by the British in 1917. Wilson was horrified to hear of the extent of these commitments, most of which went against his principle of self-determination. Britain and France were much less enthusiastic about keeping their side of these bargains once the fighting stopped, but sometimes they could not avoid it.

Although the more extreme of the Italian demands for territory were resisted by the Allies at the peace conference, Italy still made substantial gains from Austria in South Tyrol, Trentino and Istria (but not the port of Fiume, which was given to Yugoslavia). However, Italian dissatisfaction at not receiving what had been promised led directly to the first crisis of the post-war period. Italian nationalists under the poet D'Annunzio seized Fiume in September 1919 and held it for a year. They were eventually driven out by Italian forces on the understanding that Fiume would become a free city under the League of Nations. This solution did not last long. In 1924 Fiume was retaken by the Italian dictator, Mussolini.

Despite Chinese protests and refusal to sign the Treaty of Versailles, British commitments to Japan made it impossible for Wilson to resist Japanese claims to Shantung and the harbour of Kiaochow, which had been leased by Germany from China since 1890.

2 The collapse of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires

In early 1917 the Russian monarchy had collapsed under the pressures of fighting a losing war against Germany and Austria-Hungary. By the end of the year, Russia was defeated. In March 1918 Russia's new Bolshevik government signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the Germans. Under the harsh terms of this treaty, Russia gave up huge areas on its western borders: Finland, the Baltic States, its Polish provinces and the Ukraine. Although the treaty was annulled by Germany's defeat, most of the lost territory (the exception was the Ukraine) was not recovered by Russia, which was embroiled in civil war until 1920. The populations of these areas were quite distinct national groups. As

neither Germany nor Russia would rule them, they would rule themselves. The peacemakers might discuss or adjust the frontiers of these states, but Germany's defeat and Russia's collapse brought them into existence.

Similarly, in Austria-Hungary the war brought the end of the monarchy. This sprawling central European empire contained dozens of different national groups. Some, such as the Czechs and Slovaks, declared their independence while the war still continued. As the empire fell apart, new countries emerged in its place. When the peace conference met, the new states of Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia already existed. True, their boundaries had not been finally decided, but the peacemakers did not make extensive changes to them.

3 The terms of the armistice

When nations make peace at the end of a war, they first agree the terms on which they will stop fighting (the armistice), before they meet to discuss and agree the terms of the peace treaty that formally ends the war. The First World War was exceptionally damaging and bitterly fought. As it came to an end, the defeated powers sought an armistice, but the victors were determined that its terms should be so severe that there would be no chance of hostilities breaking out again. The armistice terms came to have an important effect on the terms of the peace treaties themselves. For example, in the armistice agreed with Germany, the principle of reparations was accepted. Germany also agreed to leave Alsace-Lorraine, and that its armies would evacuate all areas on the left bank of the Rhine. Each of these found its way into the final peace treaty, as did other military restrictions

QUESTIONS

- 1 What were the Germans' main territorial losses in the Treaty of Versailles?
- 2 How else did the treaty limit Germany's power?
- 3 Why were the victors not free to make the peace they wanted?

placed on Germany by the armistice. Thus terms that were intended primarily to bring the fighting to an end actually became part of the treaty that punished Germany.

4 Public opinion

All the politicians at the Paris peace conference were under pressure to meet the expectations of public opinion. The problem was that people in different countries wanted different outcomes. The Italians were determined to gain the territory that they thought would make them a great power. The French wanted to make Germany pay, and so did the British, although they had a leader who increasingly doubted the wisdom of doing this. The Americans were not really enthusiastic about being involved in

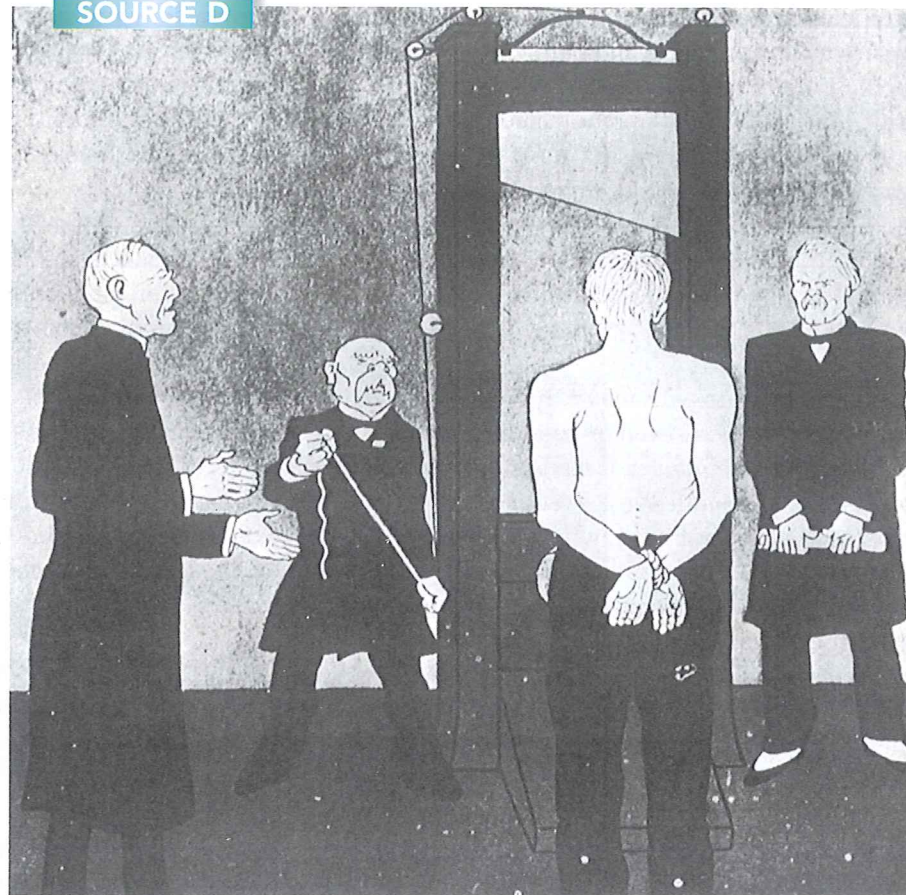
European affairs at all. Wilson, Clemenceau, Lloyd George and the Italian Prime Minister, Orlando, all found that they were not free to make the peace they wanted, as public opinion at home would not let them.

What was the immediate impact of the peace treaty on Germany up to 1923?

Although Germany lost the First World War, the reality of defeat took some time to hit the German people. Their country had not been invaded, and right up to the last few weeks of the war their leaders had continued to pretend that they were winning.

The Germans had good reason to believe that the Allies would treat them mercifully. They assumed that peace would be based on the principles of the Fourteen Points. The Kaiser, whom many blamed for the war, was now out of the way, overthrown in the German Revolution of November 1918 and replaced by a new democratic, republican government. However, German confidence was misplaced. The harsh terms of the armistice clearly indicated the kind of peace

SOURCE D



A cartoon about the Treaty of Versailles. It shows the figure of Germany about to be guillotined. The other three figures (left to right) are Wilson, Clemenceau and Lloyd George.

QUESTION

Source D shows characters from the USA, France, Britain and Germany. Which of these countries do you think the cartoon comes from? Explain your answer, using your knowledge of the Treaty of Versailles, and referring to details of the cartoon.

that would eventually be made. More ominously, none of the defeated nations was allowed representatives at the Paris peace conference. The final terms of the Treaty of Versailles were presented to the Germans with no negotiation – a 'diktat' (dictated peace), as they called it.

The Germans were stunned by the severity of the treaty. They considered rejecting it outright, but the alternative was a resumption of the war. The government knew it had no choice but to sign, and was promptly blamed by the entire German nation when it did so. Extremist opponents of the government blamed the 'November Criminals' (those who had asked for peace in November 1918) and claimed that they had 'stabbed Germany in the back'. Many Germans were only too ready to believe the myth that their country had not really lost the war, but had been betrayed by disloyal Jews and socialists. From the very start, Germans did not accept the treaty as a just peace, and many were prepared to do everything they could to make sure the treaty did not work.

The weak Weimar Republic

In the confused and violent aftermath of the war, the Weimar Republic (Germany's new government) was much weakened by being blamed for agreeing to the treaty. Extremists from right and left struggled to overthrow the republic. Even the army was not totally loyal to its own government. It was angry about the military restrictions in the treaty. Many ex-soldiers refused to disarm after the war, and became members of Freikorps. These were semi-official bands of soldiers, who helped the government crush its left-wing enemies. The trouble was that they were very unreliable allies for the republic to have, and were notorious for their extreme nationalist views. In 1920, when the government, under pressure from Britain and France, tried to enforce the military restrictions in the Versailles Treaty, a force of Freikorps under Wolfgang Kapp occupied Berlin with the intention of overthrowing the republic. The army did nothing to intervene. This attempted revolution – known as the 'Kapp Putsch' – failed only when a general strike organised as a protest against the putsch

Paul von Hindenburg, President of Germany, 1925–34.

brought communications to a standstill and demonstrated the support of the working people for the government.

The issue that Germans resented most about the Treaty of Versailles was being forced to accept responsibility for the war (the 'War Guilt' clause) and to pay reparations. It was not just Germans who thought reparations were an impossible burden for Germany to bear. In his book *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, published in 1919, the famous British economist John Maynard Keynes argued that, by keeping Germany's economy weak, reparations would undermine trade between nations and therefore harm everyone. In fact, the sum of £6600 million fixed by the Reparations Commission in 1921 was a small fraction of the amounts that had been talked about in the immediate aftermath of the war. But the treaty was so unpopular in Germany that any politicians who argued that Germany should try to pay ran the risk of assassination; indeed, several were murdered for this reason.

SOURCE E



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