

Essay: Primary Source Analysis, 1500 words

The Treaty of Versailles, 1919

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The Treaty of Versailles was signed on 28 June 1919 inside the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles, France. It is a significantly important and controversial document connected to World War 1, World War 2 and European peace and diplomacy. The document was created following the end of WW1 by the Allied powers as a formal conclusion of peace between Germany and the Allied forces, but the document is marred by controversy and a debated legacy. Instead of establishing stability and lasting amity in Europe, it can be argued that it helped lay the foundations for on-going hostility and progression to further conflict in the form of WW2. In this essay I will analyze the Treaty of Versailles as a primary source and explore the underlying intentions of the Allied forces, their intentions, the language and tone used, the repercussions of the signing by both the Allied and German forces and also what the document omits and fails to address.

The document's timing is significant in highlighting the post-World War 1 diplomatic arena in Europe as it reflects on the widespread devastation and civilian and territorial losses suffered by countries such as France, Poland, Germany and Belgium. The language used in the treaty was intentional and aimed to enforce accountability for the devastation and to assign blame, particularly on Germany, and also to pursue retribution, this can be seen in the War Guilt Clause (Article 231) where it notes "*Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage*". This is a strong and clear push of accountability and intentional blame towards Germany; its intention is to morally condemn Germany and to diminish the responsibility held by any other factored country. The War Guilt Clause reflects the core message and intention of the treaty, using the word "guilt" implies moral accountability, shame and arguably humiliation, which then enforces liability on Germany, it is bold and holds the full weight of the blame and judgement of the conflict solely onto one country.

The liability language continues with Reparations (Article 232) as the Allies required legal justification to press for reparations, they imposed that "*Germany undertakes to make compensation for all damage done to the civilian population of the Allied and Associated Powers*". This pursues the notion of total accountability to Germany and underlines the financial retributions demanded by the Allies which are justified by the agreement to Article 231. Using the phrase "undertakes" carries the message of it being obligatory and not in any way debatable, this lends to the fundamentally punitive objection of the treaty towards Germany. Notably the treaty uses the term "*civilian population*" which can be interpreted as an emotionally charged use of language to represent innocent victims as opposed to land or structural losses. This frames justice in terms of morality and implies that Germany is responsible by reinforcing moral culpability. This can be interpreted as a strategic move by France as its language encourages the establishment of hierarchy, security and of power in post-war Europe, weakening Germany's diplomacy whilst strengthening France's authority. France played a pivotal part in the negotiations of the treaty, not only due to having suffered significant loss during World War 1, but also due to their own security concerns about Germany, having been

invaded by them twice (1870 & 1914). France had deep distrust and factually grounded concerns about Germany, and the negotiations in this treaty allowed them to exploit Germany's loss to develop their own security and demand harsh terms against Germany.

Alongside the language used in the treaty, it should be noted that the tone offers analysis into the core message of the document towards Germany, specifically using phrases such as “*Germany shall...*”, “*Germany is required to...*”, “*Germany must...*” can be construed as condescending, dictatorial and shows the Allied use of authoritative and commanding tones which again supports the punitive and disciplinary core of the treaty.

The document is structured with a clearly punitive objective; Germany was excluded from the negotiations and were effectively forced to sign and accept the conditions. It is not equitable or impartial and features heavy quasi-dictatorial language which results in military restrictions and territorial losses for Germany, whereas France gains financial compensations and diplomatic hierarchy. The function of the treaty document does not seem to be in favor of stability and peace, but of imposing blame and punishment.

Significant military sanctions and restrictions were imposed on Germany through this document and provided a key area of analysis, with the strategic rewards for the Allies being substantial as a result. The treaty limited the Germany army to 100,000 men (article 160) banned the use of tanks, aircraft and specific weapons (Articles 171-173) “*The manufacture of tanks, heavy artillery, poison gas, and military aircraft is forbidden*” and required the Rhineland to be demilitarized (Article 428-430). These terms were multi-faceted, as in one aspect its intention was to ensure that Germany was incapable of being a powerful military threat, but on the other hand it shows the deep distrust that the Allies had for Germany at the time and indicated that peace and stability was only achievable with Germany's powers shadowed. No other Allied power was forced into disarmament and again focuses the blame entirely on Germany for all the destruction and violence of World War 1.

The economic fallout because of the reparations and compensations imposed on Germany by the treaty of Versailles were significant factors in the subsequent instability of Germany and, by extension, the instability of Europe. Germany was required to make substantial financial payments to the Allied powers as compensation for the devastation caused by the war. Article 233 of the treaty states: “*Germany shall make good the damage caused to the civilian population of the Allied and Associated Powers by the aggression of Germany and her allies to the extent of its capacity*”

Whilst the amount was not specifically listed in the treaty itself, Germany was later required by the 1921 London Schedule of Payments to pay 132 billion gold marks (approximately £6.6 billion at the time). The economic impact and scale of these reparations combined with the economic loss Germany suffered during World War 1 had a devastating and profound impact on Germany, which Ferguson (1998) notes, then led to the hyperinflation crisis of 1923¹ and

¹ Niall Ferguson – *The Pity of War* (1998)

staged to undermine confidence in the then German Chancellor Weimar's Government, creating widespread poverty and hardship.

Chronologically, this economic devastation is significant as it created the foundations for economic-driven political reactions. The precarious combination of social discontent, financial instability, territory loss, and political insecurity aided the rise and support of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party during the 1920's and 1930's in Germany. It can be perceived that The Treaty of Versailles and its economic clauses intended to punish Germany subsequently, although indirectly, destabilized Europe and paved the way for the fundamental root causes of the later World War 2.

A significant aspect of the treaty is its territorial arrangements; these terms forced Germany to cede land to France, Belgium and the newly re-established Poland, and created the Polish Corridor, which separated East Prussia from Germany. Not only did Germany lose 13% of its land (27,000 square miles) but also meant that German civilians were now in new ethnic and political boundaries and were fragmented and politically aggrieved (MacMillan 2001)² something that had not been considered by the Allied Powers.

The legacy of this was evident in Hitler's Reichstag address on 1 September 1939 in Berlin, where he aimed to justify the invasion of Poland, the same day he invaded Poland, he notes *"Millions of Germans were placed under the rule of other nations, torn from the Fatherland, and subjected to oppression."* And goes on further to add *"We were forced, by the shameful Treaty of Versailles, to cede land that rightly belongs to Germany."* The address in Reichstag highlights the deep anger and feeling of injustice that Hitler and many German people upheld for over 20 years, leading up to the initial stages of what became World War 2, and shows the devastating consequence the Treaty of Versailles had on German society and how it fueled decades of nationalism, resentment and anger.

Considerable omissions in the Treaty of Versailles are the lack of mentions of other directly involved countries; it did not mention Austria-Hungary due to the empire having collapsed and its territories re-distributed in the Saint-Germain and Trianon Treaties. Italy, although victorious, was barely mentioned, Russia, a major power, was ignored and excluded due to the 1917 Revolution and political isolation, all of which indirectly contributed to later instability. However, despite the treaty's punitive objective, it can be argued that there were positive examples that came from the document, such as the incorporation of the principles of self-determination. By the creation of nation states such as Poland, it allowed ethnic groups to pursue sovereignty, this aimed to reduce imperial domination and represented a shift towards more democratic ideals.

In conclusion, to evaluate the Treaty of Versailles as a primary source, it is essential to consider both its impact through 20th Century Europe and its content. The treaty directly contributed to the conditions by means of economic hardship, political instability, territorial re-distribution and power shifts, creating a sense of grievance, injustice and anger in Germany that led to

² Margaret MacMillan – *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (2001)

extremism and eventually the support of Hitler's Nazi Party. The document neglects to focus on long term security and stability and is exploited by Allied powers to facilitate land grabs and authority gains and uses punitive language and phrases to punish and humiliate Germany instead of delivering long-term peace.

Bibliography

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