

TWENTIETH CENTURY VIEWPOINTS

SECOND EDITION

An Interpretive History
for the 21st Century

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To the readers of this text: May they learn from
the lessons of the twentieth century as they
shape their lives in the twenty-first century.

— Don Quinlan

With many thanks to Don, Spencer, Wallace,
and McGee Globa.

— Pamela Perry-Globa

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Main image: A couple take cover in Beijing as
Chinese troops crush a pro-democracy
demonstration in Tiananmen Square on 5 June
1989. Credit: AP/Wide World Photos. *Inset*
image: "Wait for me, Daddy" — A child reaches
out to his father as soldiers of the British
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The First World War: 1914-1918



Over the Top was painted by Canadian war artist A. Bastien. Look closely at this image. What does it suggest about the nature of the First World War? What feelings are inspired in the viewer?

“Europe, in her insanity, has started something unbelievable. In such times one realizes to what a sad species of animals one belongs.”

— Albert Einstein, (1879-1955), physicist and winner of the 1921 Nobel Prize for Physics

“The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.”

— Edward Grey (1862-1933)
British Foreign Secretary on the eve of the First World War

Overview

In the early 1900s, the clouds of war were beginning to form over Europe. Stimulated by rising nationalism and the growth of imperialist rivalries, nations sought protection against each other. Most of the major European powers entered into strategic alliances and began rebuilding their armies and navies. By 1914, Europe had divided into two heavily armed camps, ready for conflict.

Yet while many of Europe's leaders saw war as inevitable, no one envisioned the four years of slaughter and horror that were to follow. The treaty that ended the war failed to bring either a just or a lasting peace. In reality, the First World War brought to an abrupt end a century of relative peace and stability and introduced a century of conflict, uncertainty, and change.

Focus Questions

1. What were the underlying causes of the First World War?
2. How did technology change the nature of warfare during the war?
3. What were the major outcomes of the First World War?
4. What were the terms of the Treaty of Versailles? Was the Treaty of Versailles a just peace settlement?

The Causes of the First World War

There were at least four underlying causes of the First World War: nationalism, economic rivalry, the arms race, and the alliance system. Within the context of conditions in 1914, these causes help to explain why war broke out. An atmosphere of fear and suspicion among nations had developed. People began to believe war was necessary.

NATIONALISM

Nationalism is an intense feeling of loyalty to a nation. It can be positive, but at the turn of the twentieth century nationalism often meant hostility to other nations and feelings of superiority. Nations often felt war was a test of strength and worth.

The French region of Alsace-Lorraine, alongside Germany's western border, had an abundance of coal and iron ore deposits and a thriving textile industry. When France was defeated in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, it surrendered Alsace-Lorraine to Germany. The region became important to Germany's naval and military power. But German control spawned bitter resentment among the largely French-speaking population. The region became a focus for French nationalism and anti-German sentiment. On the larger stage, France attempted to restore national pride and prestige by focusing on acquiring an empire. Thus France joined the scramble among European nations for colonies in Africa.

German nationalism was stimulated by politics, economics, and a desire to become an imperial power. There was

a new pride and optimism after the unification of the German states in 1871. Following unification, German technology, industry, and trade developed rapidly. Intense competition for markets contributed to its growing economic nationalism. But Germany's imperialist ambitions went unfulfilled. By the time Germany entered the race for colonies, Britain, France, and other European powers had already established distant empires that included the most desirable territories. Germany's inability to acquire important new colonies was a source of great frustration. From the German point of view, Britain and France were conspiring to prevent their nation from expanding.

In Austria-Hungary, **ethnic nationalism**—a form of nationalism based not on the nation-state but rather on a particular religious, linguistic, or cultural identity—was fragmenting the country. The old Austro-Hungarian Empire that had once dominated middle Europe was in a state of inner decay. The empire contained many nationalities, including Serbs, Croats, Slovaks, Czechs, and Poles. In 1914, local wars erupted throughout the Balkans as each group fought for its own interests. These conflicts did not go unnoticed by neighbouring powers. Russia saw an opportunity to increase its influence in the region and possibly gain control of the Dardanelles. Russian nationalists called on the Slavic people in the Balkans to unite under their leadership. Within this movement known as **Pan-Slavism**, Russia was supporting the Slavic state of Serbia in its efforts to break free of Austria-Hungary.

Britain was the major economic and imperial power in the world. The country's nationalism was intricately linked with pride in the British Empire. A sense of noble destiny permeated British society.

In middle-class England, belief in king and country was intertwined with the concept of duty. Young men enlisted in the army, believing that a **Pax Britannia**, or British peace, was the proper order of things in the world and that it was their duty to maintain this order. As the dominant world power, Britain was eager to maintain the status quo. Its leaders were suspicious of aggressive new nations—Germany and Japan—that sought to increase their territories and power in competition with the British Empire.

ECONOMIC RIVALRY

In an age of rampant imperialism, as discussed on pages 21-26 in Chapter One, Germany and Britain were keen economic competitors. Imperialism was not simply about military and political competition. Leaders understood that economic strength was the true foundation of military and political power and so **economic rivalry** was intense.

The unification of Germany and the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine enabled the German economy to flourish. By 1900, many German industries had surpassed those in Britain and in 1914 were producing twice as much steel. Because Germany had become industrialized later than Britain, its manufacturing industry enjoyed newer factories with equipment that incorporated the latest technology. British factories, on the other hand, were older and becoming less efficient. In addition, the excellent German education system, with its concentration on science and technology, produced the engineers and scientists needed to foster Germany's developing technology. While the British and French economies continued to grow after 1900, they could not keep pace with Germany. This economic competition increased tensions in Europe.

THE ARMS RACE

One of the consequences of nationalism, imperialism, and economic rivalry in the decades preceding the First World War was a determined **arms race** to win military superiority, usually through sheer size of military forces and/or the control of advanced weaponry. The new German monarch, Kaiser Wilhelm II, grandson of Britain's Queen Victoria, wanted to extend German influence as far as possible. He hoped to increase German military and economic power to equal that of Britain. As the world's dominant power, however, Britain was not about to relinquish its favourable balance of power. Both countries, afraid that the other would gain an advantage, embarked on large-scale armament programs.

The Naval Race

Britain depended on its navy for defence and to guarantee the security of its colonies. As a result, the British navy was twice the size of any other power. After 1898 Germany launched a naval build-up designed to rival Britain's fleet. Forty-one battleships and sixty cruisers were planned for the next two decades. From the British point of view, Germany's naval expansion posed a threat to Britain's naval supremacy and constituted a direct challenge to the nation's security.

The British responded by launching their own naval expansion. In 1906 a new class of battleship, the **dreadnought**, was introduced, intensifying the race for naval supremacy. By 1914 Britain numbered 29 battleships of this class, while Germany had 18.

What was the major significance of the naval race? Until 1900 Britain's closest ally on the European continent had been Germany. Since the days of Napoleon, France had traditionally been Britain's enemy and imperial rival. But

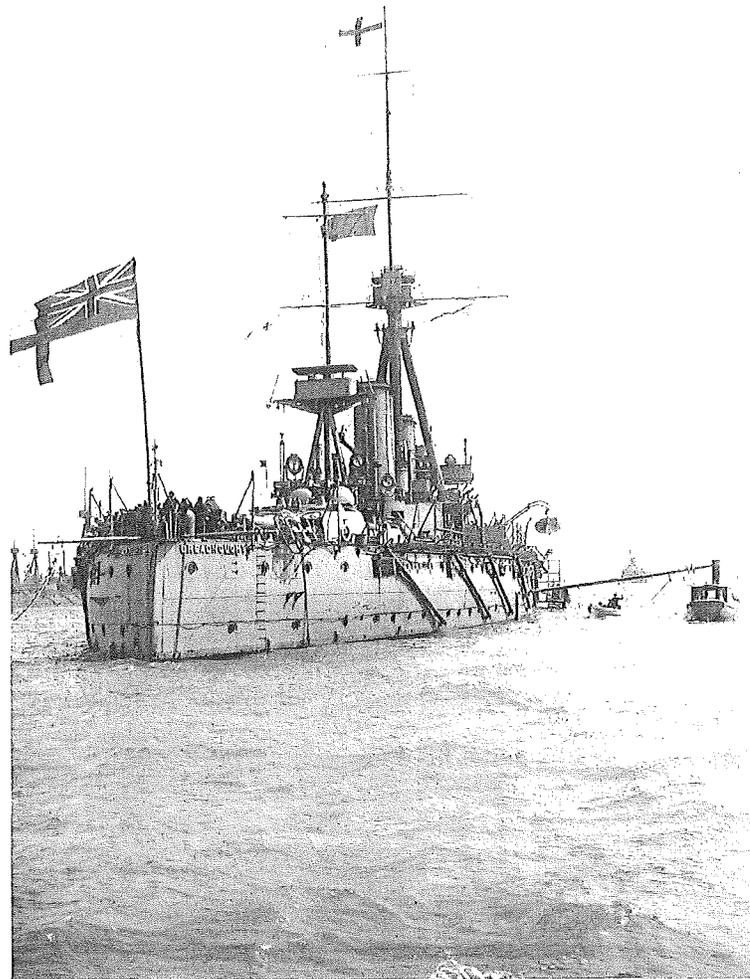


Figure 2.1

In 1906, the British introduced a new class of battleship, the heavily armoured dreadnought (literally "fear nothing") equipped with deadly, high calibre guns. However, Germany responded quickly launching its first dreadnought in 1908. Why do arms races often end in war?

German naval expansion alarmed British leaders and aroused suspicions about their ally's ultimate goals. Rather than face a potential enemy in isolation, Britain sought alliances with its former rivals, France and Russia.

Economic and Military Potential of the Powers, 1913 to 1914

	Great Britain	France	Russia	Germany	Austria-Hungary	United States
Population (millions)	45.6	39.7	175.1	66.9	52.1	97.3
Military and naval personnel*	532 000	910 000	1 352 000	891 000	444 000	164 000
Warships tonnage*	2 714 000	900 000	679 000	1 305 000	372 000	985 000
Total industrial potential (UK in 1900 = 100)	127.2	57.3	76.6	137.7	40.7	298.1
% shares of world manufacturing output	13.6	6.1	8.2	14.8	4.4	32.0

* Compiled from Kennedy, Paul. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. London: Unwin Hyman Ltd., 1988.

Figure 2.2

Which nations appear to be stronger in terms of military power? Which nation appears to have the greatest potential? Why?

A SYSTEM OF ALLIANCES

Otto von Bismarck, the powerful German chancellor who had brought about the unification of Germany, engineered an alliance system in the 1880s that provided Europe with the illusion of peace and stability. Behind the scenes, however, tensions were mounting.

Bismarck's diplomacy had been aimed at isolating France. In 1879, he signed the Dual Alliance with Austria-Hungary. Three years later, in 1882, he negotiated the **Triple Alliance** that drew Italy into the pact. Then in 1887, he persuaded Russia to sign a secret Reinsurance Treaty in which both countries agreed to remain neutral if the other was attacked by a third power. Bismarck avoided conflict with Britain by refusing to pursue a colonial empire and by resisting German naval expansion.

After the death of Wilhelm I in 1888 his successor, Wilhelm II, embarked on very different policies. The new kaiser decided to act as chancellor himself and dismissed Bismarck in 1890. In the same year he allowed the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia to lapse. Feeling cast aside by its former ally, Russia turned to France. In 1891, the two countries negotiated an

understanding, and in 1894 they entered into a military alliance. This marked an important shift in European alignments as France and Russia had been enemies since the French invasion of Russia in 1812 during the Napoleonic Wars.

These changes in Europe were a source of concern for Britain. Its leaders were distrustful of the new alliance between Russia and France and uneasy about Germany's growing economic power and increasing imperialism. But of even greater importance was Germany's new policy of naval expansion. Growing insecurity caused Britain to end its century-old policy of "splendid isolation" from alliances with continental powers. By 1907, Britain had joined France and Russia to form the **Triple Entente**.

Europe was now divided into two rival camps—the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy against the Triple Entente of France, Russia, and Britain. From this point until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the arms race intensified, armies multiplied in size, navies expanded their fleets—and international tensions grew. All that was lacking was a spark to set off a deadly chain of events.

MAP STUDY



Figure 2.3
Europe in 1914

As the new century opened, most nations in Europe were drawn into two armed camps: The Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente. Although naval power was important, the First World War was still primarily a land war.

Interpreting

1. Identify the members of each alliance.
2. Review the map and note what you see as the relative strengths and weaknesses of each alliance in geographic terms.
3. Which nation changed sides during the war?

In Review

1. Summarize the four major underlying causes of the First World War.
2. In your opinion, which of these causes was most important? Why?
3. Which, if any, of these causes of the First World War still exist in our world today? Explain.

In Review

1. Why did the young men from Newfoundland suffer such horrible casualties at the Battle of the Somme?
2. a) Briefly describe the nature of the war from a soldier's viewpoint.
b) How does this reality compare with the image presented at the outset of war?
3. Describe the impact of weapons such as tanks, aeroplanes, and submarines on the course of the war.
4. In your view, should Canada have been involved in the First World War? Explain your answer.
5. What was the significance of the US entry into the war?
6. Outline the major reasons for Germany's defeat.

The Search For Peace

Ending the First World War had been a long and difficult struggle. President Wilson looked to a new world body—the League of Nations—to provide **collective security**, that is, a system to ensure world peace with the support and action of the world's nations and to prevent future conflicts. Designing a fair peace proved to be equally challenging. The Allies had the difficult task of redrawing the map of Europe and establishing the conditions for a lasting peace. But the process seemed doomed from the start. The new communist government in Russia was refused representation at the talks. Decision-making power rested in the hands of three governments—Britain, France, and the United States.

The Paris Conference, convened on 18 January 1919, was the largest and most important diplomatic gathering since the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Thirty Allied nations were given seats at the conference. The defeated nations were not given any status at the negotiations, so their fate would be decided for them. While all present had

a voice in the terms of the peace treaty, the real decision-making power lay with the three leading victorious nations.

The damage the war had inflicted was horrendous. Ten million lives had been lost. The direct financial costs were estimated at \$180 billion, with another \$150 billion in indirect costs. Four great empires had crumbled: Hohenzollern Germany, Habsburg Austria-Hungary, Romanov Russia, and Ottoman Turkey. The task that lay before the peacemakers was to establish political and economic stability in Europe and to ensure that the First World War was, in US President Woodrow Wilson's words, truly "the war to end all wars."

The United States was regarded with great hope by millions of war-weary Europeans. President Wilson offered a vision for a new world order along with the moral authority and economic power to get things done. Wilson joined the American peace delegation in Paris. His personal participation in the peace process and his pledge "to make the world safe for democracy" was welcomed in Europe with great hope and enthusiasm.

WILSON AND THE FOURTEEN POINTS

Wilson believed that war was caused by three major factors: secret diplomacy among nations; the tendency of dominant nationalities to oppress ethnic minorities; and autocratic governments ruled by elites. He believed that these causes of war had to be removed if the world was to have lasting peace. Wilson's **Fourteen Points**, announced on 8 January 1918, addressed these key issues.

Wilson hoped the Fourteen Points would be the basis for a new world order, but as the hard realities of negotiations proceeded, these principles gradually receded to the background. Key decisions

were made in secret by the big powers. Revenge and power politics dominated. In time, the high public expectations based on Wilson's idealistic statements would be shattered.

THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE: DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS

The major powers had different expectations at the Paris Peace Conference that began on 18 January 1919. The United States was determined to establish a new international order based on Wilson's Fourteen Points. Added to this idealism was the practical desire to resume the free flow of trade so that American business could continue to prosper. Britain, too,

Wilson's Fourteen Points

- I. Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.
- II. Absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas, outside territorial waters, alike in peace and in war.
- III. The removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all the nations consenting to the peace and associating themselves for its maintenance.
- IV. Adequate guarantees given and taken that national armaments will be reduced to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety.
- V. A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based on the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty, the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.
- VI. The evacuation of all Russian territory and... assistance of every kind that she may need and may herself desire.
- VII. Belgium... must be evacuated [by the Germans] and restored.
- VIII. All French territory should be freed and the invaded portions restored, the wrong done to France in the matter... of Alsace-Lorraine... should be righted.
- IX. A readjustment of frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality.
- X. The people of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safe-guarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity of autonomous development.
- XI. Romania, Serbia, and Montenegro should be evacuated... Serbia accorded free access to the sea.
- XII. The Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule...[should be allowed] autonomous development.
- XIII. An independent Polish state... should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations...[and should] be assured a free and secure access to the sea.
- XIV. A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike. "The world must be made safe for democracy"

Figure 2.13

For each of Wilson's points, indicate whether you agree or disagree. Be prepared to explain your choices. In your opinion, which point is the most important? Why?

was eager to establish a peaceful atmosphere in which business could flourish. France, where the northern provinces had been a vast battlefield and where the dead numbered over 1 million, wanted assurances that it would be able to rebuild without threat from neighbouring Germany. Thus each country had different expectations of the peace treaty.

The United States was a new player in the affairs of Europe. The long tradition of American diplomacy had been one of isolation. Essentially, the Americans were eager to revert to that policy. Their greatest national interest in the peace process was to maintain their robust economy. To that end, the US placed pressure on Britain and France to repay their war loans. These war allies in turn decided to pass on this financial burden to Germany.

French Objectives

France had two basic goals at the peace conference: national security and financial **reparations** (payments). To ensure national security, France wanted to remove the threat from German military power. In the pre-war years, Germany had developed into a powerful military and economic nation. To keep Germany in check, France had forged an alliance with Russia. Now, with Russia in the hands of the Bolsheviks, France had to find other guarantees of security. France demanded the return of Alsace-Lorraine, which had been seized by Germany following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. The Allies accepted this without question. But France also demanded the German Rhineland to serve as a buffer zone between the two countries. Seizure of this territory clearly violated Wilson's principle of **national self-determination**, which called for individual nationalities to have their own state and protected

borders, and the demand was rejected. However, if France could not have the Rhineland, it demanded that the region be neutralized. The compromise was a **demilitarized zone**. Germany was prohibited from placing troops or fortifications within 50 km of the east bank of the Rhine River. As insurance, the Allies would occupy the west bank for 15 years. This settlement, combined with other military restrictions and a pledge of immediate military assistance from Britain and the United States in the event of German aggression, satisfied France's security concerns.

The other French goal was to gain financial compensation for losses during the war. Northern France had been devastated after four years of German occupation. Furthermore, the German army had destroyed what was left of the region when they withdrew in 1918. Mines were flooded, railways destroyed, and fields torn apart by shells and trenches. To make up for the German destruction of French coal mines, France was awarded coal rights in Germany's Saar Valley until 1935.

French premier Georges Clemenceau demanded that Germany pay full reparations for war damages. The Americans felt that reparations should be limited to what Germany could afford to pay in 30 years. But the French disagreed, demanding that Germany pay whatever damages were assessed with no time limit. Eventually Clemenceau agreed to the 30-year limit on the condition that it be

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The BBC's Modern World History pages are an excellent source for more information, documents, visuals, etc., on the Treaty of Versailles. This is a very helpful source for initial research for projects or assignments. Scroll down the homepage to learn about each of the leaders who attended the peace conference.

extended if necessary. In 1921, Germany was presented with a reparations bill of more than \$30 billion, of which the French share was 52 per cent. It was impossible for Germany to pay this amount, and by 1922 the country had already fallen behind in its payments. The German economic crisis soon turned to political crisis.

British Objectives

The key British objective at the conference was to ensure the security of the sea lanes to its empire. This meant that German sea power had to be crippled. This was achieved by reducing the German navy to a token force of six warships, prohibiting German submarines, and redistributing German colonies to the Allies. Britain was not prepared to support French demands for huge reparation

payments or territorial gains. If Germany were forced to pay massive reparations to France, the result would be a weak Germany and a strong France. In 1919, Britain was beginning to fear the spread of Bolshevism more than it feared the rise of Germany. Both British Prime Minister Lloyd George and Liberal Party colleague Winston Churchill felt that if Germany were weakened too much, it could fall into the hands of communist Russia. So Britain began to soften its stand on reparations.

THE PEACE OF PARIS, 1919

When the Allies established the terms of the **Treaty of Versailles**, Germany was invited to Versailles for the formal signing on 18 June 1919. Germany signed the treaty, but only under protest. The Germans

The Main Terms of the Treaty of Versailles

1. Territorial Changes

- a) Alsace-Lorraine to be returned to France
- b) Belgium, Poland, and Czechoslovakia to receive German border areas
- c) Poland re-established as an independent state with access to the Baltic Sea (the Polish Corridor to Danzig)
- d) Danzig to be a free city under the League of Nations
- e) Germany to give up all overseas colonies to the League of Nations; mandates for administering former German colonies assigned to Britain, France, and Japan

2. Military Terms

- a) German army reduced to 100 000 troops
- b) Germany forbidden to have an airforce
- c) Most German naval vessels, including the submarine force, to be handed over to the Allies
- d) Germany forbidden to have heavy military frontier fortifications

3. Admission of War Guilt

- a) Germany forced to accept responsibility for starting the war

4. Reparations

- a) Germany to pay war reparations to France and Belgium for damages caused during the war
- b) Germany to pay reparations for shipping damages by turning over part of its merchant marine fleet

5. Other Terms

- a) Germany to cede Saar coal mines to France for fifteen years
- b) Allied troops to occupy the Rhineland for fifteen years
- c) East bank of Rhine to be demilitarized

Figure 2.14

The Treaty of Versailles was one of the most important documents of the twentieth century. Its failure helped shape global politics for decades to come. Review the terms of the treaty and indicate which terms you support, which ones you reject, and why.

were particularly incensed by the War Guilt clause that stipulated that Germany accept sole responsibility for the war: "The Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies." It was a clause that would have serious repercussions in the years to come.

In the months following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, separate treaties were signed with Austria (the Treaty of St. Germain, 1919); Bulgaria (the Treaty of Neuilly, 1919); Turkey (the Treaty of Sevres, 1920); and Hungary (the Treaty of Trianon, 1920). Seven new countries were created from the former Russian, Turkish, and Austro-Hungarian empires, including Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Finland, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. Millions of ordinary people found themselves living as minorities in new countries or in different countries after the boundaries were redrawn. The new Europe became a breeding ground for political tension and unrest. Europe needed stability to heal the wounds of war but turmoil was its destiny.

The League of Nations

The League of Nations came into being with the signing of the treaty. This international organization of nations was part of Woodrow Wilson's vision of a new world order. Ironically, the United States Senate rejected the treaty and along with it the League of Nations. Even without American membership, however, the League was a step towards the establishment of an international arbitrator of disputes, although it came to be seen as a European rather than a world body.



Figure 2.15

The "Big Three"—British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, and American President Woodrow Wilson—shaped and signed the Treaty of Versailles. In your opinion should the defeated nations have had any input into the treaty? Explain.

EVALUATING THE TREATY

The Treaty of Versailles created controversy that continues even to this day. German colonies across the globe were taken away. The territorial, military, and economic terms infuriated and humiliated Germany. Later German leaders used the hated treaty to illustrate how unfairly the world was treating Germany. Instead of resolution, the treaty encouraged revenge.

MAP STUDY

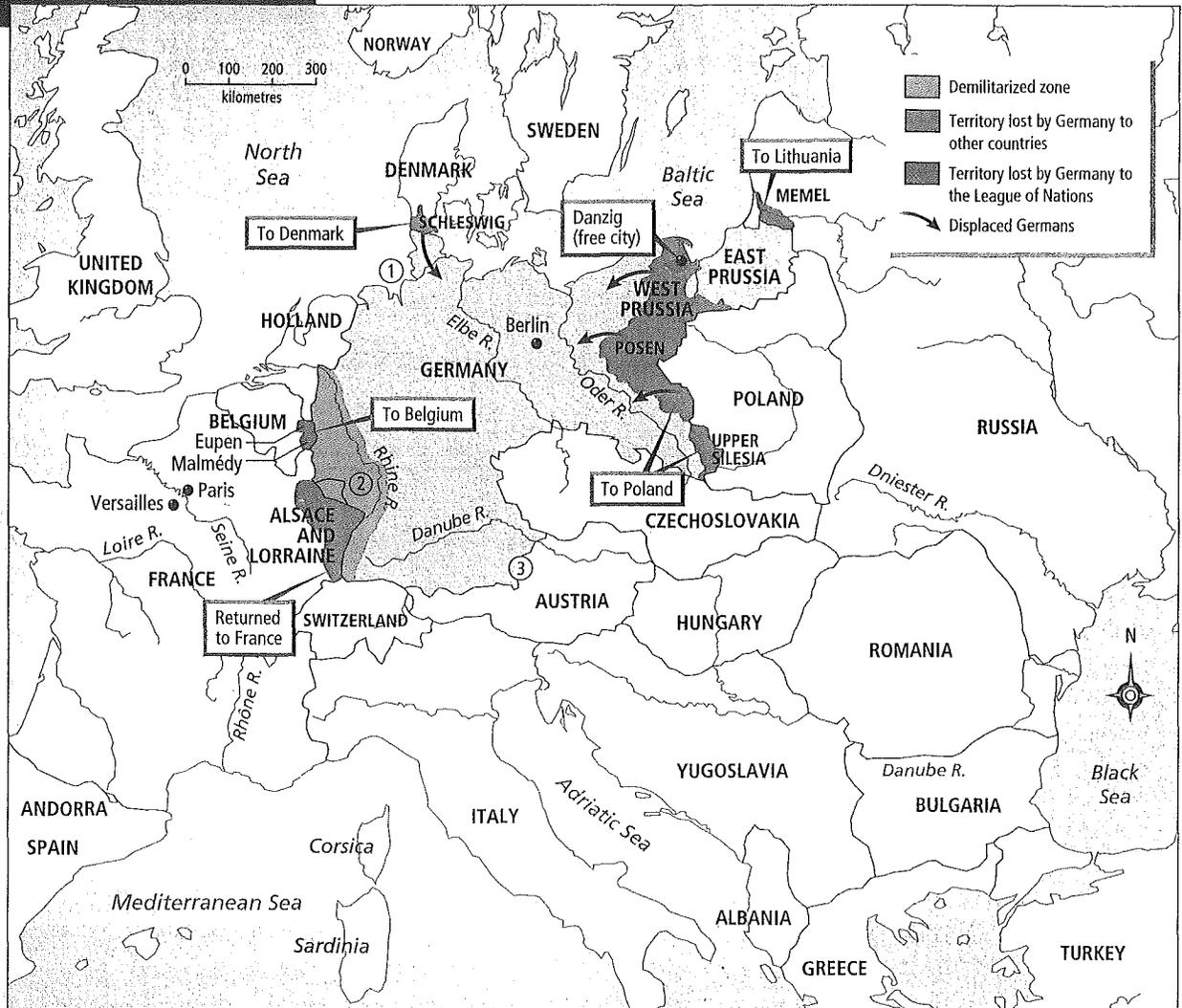


Figure 2.16
The Price of Defeat: Germany's
Losses by the Terms of the Treaty
of Versailles

The Treaty of Versailles redrew the map of Europe and parts of the globe. Compare this map with the map of Europe in 1914 (see page 37).

1. All German overseas colonies lost. Displaced Germans returned to Germany.
2. Saar coalfields placed under French rule for fifteen years.
3. Union between Austria and Germany forbidden.

Interpreting

1. What evidence is there that the principle of national self-determination was violated?
2. What new nations were created in Europe?
3. What impact might this have on political stability in the region? Explain.
4. In your view, were German losses justified? Explain.

Reparation payments were blamed for Germany's staggering inflation and economic collapse. To make these payments, the government printed paper money until the currency was worthless. By 1923, the German economy was in ruins. Furthermore, the military restrictions imposed on Germany were seen as harsh and humiliating. Thousands of demobilized German troops, resenting the terms of the treaty and disgruntled

with a political system that had been incapable of striking a better deal in Paris, joined right-wing political groups. The treaty provided fertile ground for propaganda against the Allies' treatment of Germany and it was employed with great success. German violations of the treaty grew bolder and more flagrant until finally Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party effectively killed the Treaty of Versailles in the early 1930s.

In Review

1. What were the key objectives of France, Britain, and the United States at the Paris Peace Conference? In your opinion, which country was most successful in achieving its objectives? Explain your answer.
2. Why did Wilson's idealism not gain much support at the peace conference?
3. In your opinion, do Wilson's Fourteen Points have any relevance in today's world? Explain.
4. How would you have changed the Treaty of Versailles and why?
5. In general, what do you think should be the central purpose of a treaty that ends a serious conflict?
6. How did the Treaty of Versailles help the rise of Hitler and the Nazi Party?

Summary

When war broke out in 1914, the mood was almost festive. Most people believed it would be a short war that would solve many of the problems of the competing nations. As the war dragged on, it became a battle of attrition: who could continue to supply soldiers and weapons in order to outlast the others.

The war cost Europe dearly in terms of human lives and almost ruined the

continent economically. The cost of feeding and equipping the military forces was staggering. The destruction left vast areas of Belgium and France in ruins. But while the economies of both the victors and the vanquished in Europe were severely damaged, the American economy was strengthened by the war. Even though most European countries recovered by 1924, they faced a new order in which the international economic **balance of power** had shifted from Europe in favour of the United States.

Viewpoints

ISSUE: Was the Treaty of Versailles a fair and reasonable treaty?

Background

Under the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, the victorious allies imposed the conditions of peace upon Germany. The key players drafting the treaty were American president Woodrow Wilson, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, and French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau. The expectations were that a just and fair treaty based on the idealism of Wilson's Fourteen Points would emerge from the Paris Peace Conference. To many observers, however, the true spirit of the Fourteen Points was sacrificed and replaced with a series of tough measures designed to cripple Germany.

Economist John Maynard Keynes was a delegate at the peace conference. He abandoned the proceedings in protest over the harsh and unrealistic demands of the treaty. In his famous book *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, Keynes denounced the treaty.

Twenty years after the Treaty of Versailles, the world was engulfed in the Second World War when historian Paul Birdsall published his review of the Paris Peace settlement. In it, he praised Woodrow Wilson and his idealism as well as the overall peace settlement he had inspired. Read each of these viewpoints carefully and complete the questions that follow. (You may want to refer to the Skill Path "Analysing a Reading" on page 14 before beginning.)

John Maynard Keynes

There are two separate aspects of the peace which we have imposed on the enemy—on the one hand its justice, on the other hand its wisdom and its expediency.

Its justice

The nature of the terms which we were entitled in justice to impose depends, in part, on the responsibility of the enemy nations for causing so tremendous a calamity as the late war, and in part on the understanding on which the enemy laid down his arms at the time of the armistice. In my own opinion, it is not possible to lay the entire responsibility for the state of affairs out of which the war arose on any single nation.

But I believe, nevertheless, that Germany bears a special and peculiar responsibility for the war

itself for its universal and devastating character, and for its final development into a combat without quarter for mastery or defeat. A criminal may be the outcome of his environment, but he is none the less a criminal.

Even so, however, it was our duty to look more to the future than to the past, to distinguish between the late rulers of Germany on the one hand and her common people and unborn posterity on the other, and to be sure that our acts were guided by magnanimity and wisdom more than by revenge or hatred.... Above all, should not the future peace of the world have been our highest and guiding motive?...

The treaty's wisdom

With these brief comments I pass from the justice

of the treaty, which can not be ignored even when it is not our central topic, to its wisdom and its expediency. Under these heads my criticism of the treaty is double. In the first place, this treaty ignores the economic solidarity of Europe, and by aiming at the destruction of the economic life of Germany it threatens the health and prosperity of the Allies themselves. In the second place, by making demands the execution of which is in the literal sense impossible, it stultifies itself and leaves Europe more unsettled than it found it. The treaty, by overstepping the limits of the possible, has in practice settled nothing.

Indemnity demands

I believe that it would have been a wise and just act to have asked the German Government at the peace negotiations to agree to a final settlement, without further examination of particulars. This would have provided an immediate and certain solution, and would have required from Germany a sum which, if she were granted certain indulgences, it might not have proved entirely impossible for her to pay. This sum should have been

divided up among the Allies themselves on a basis of need and general equity.

The blank check

No final amount is specified by the treaty itself, which fixes no definite sum as representing Germany's liability. This feature has been the subject of very general criticism that is equally inconvenient to Germany and to the Allies themselves that she should not know what she has to pay or what they are to receive. The method, apparently contemplated by the treaty, of arriving at the final result over a period of many months by an addition of hundreds of thousands of individual claims for damage to land, farm buildings and chickens, is evidently impracticable, and the reasonable course would have been for both parties to compound for a round sum without examination of details. If this round sum had been named in the treaty, the settlement would have been placed on a more businesslike basis.

Source: John Maynard Keynes, "The Peace of Versailles," *Everybody's Magazine*, 1920 (September) pp. 36-41.

Paul Birdsall

The simple thesis of those who oppose the treaty is that the doctrinaire and unrealistic program of Wilson collapsed under the impact of the power politics of Europe. Nationalist aims triumphed over his principles. There was division of the spoils of war... in defiance of his principles of self-determination. Keynes in his disillusionment has fixed the legend of a Carthaginian Peace* in Wilsonian disguise.

This is caricature, not history, but like most successful caricature it has enough verisimilitude [truth] to be plausible.... The 'Reparation' chapter of the Treaty of Versailles, besides being a clear violation of the Pre-Armistice Agreement with Germany, proved in the outcome to be the most disastrous section of the treaty.

The prosaic [sad] truth is that elements of good and bad were combined in the treaties. There were Carthaginian features like the Reparation settlement and Wilsonian features like the League of Nations. The territorial settlement in Europe was

by no means the wholesale, iniquitous, [unfair] and cynical perversion of Wilson's principles of self-determination which has been pictured. The populations of central Europe are hopelessly mixed and, therefore, simple self-determination is impossible.

The treaty was essentially a compromise between Anglo-American and French conceptions of a stable international order. On the one hand, immediate French concern for military security was taken care of by the limitation of German armaments, demilitarization of the Rhineland area and Allied military occupation for a fifteen-year period, and—finally—an Anglo-American treaty of military guarantee. They represented the minimum price which English and American negotiators had to pay for French abandonment of their traditional policy of entirely dismembering Germany. They were a realistic concession to French needs without violating the Fourteen Points in any important particular.

The Reparation settlement was the chief stumbling block, partly because of impossible financial demands. In both financial and political results it proved disastrous. The Reparation issue emphasized more than any other the necessity of continuing Anglo-American cooperation to make effective Anglo-American conceptions of a world order.

The defection of the United States destroyed the Anglo-American preponderance which alone could have stabilized Europe. It impaired the authority and prestige of the League at its birth and it precipitated an Anglo-French duel which reduced Europe to the chaos from which Hitler emerged to produce new chaos. Practically and immediately, it destroyed the Anglo-American treaty of military guarantee which was to have been one of the main props of French Security.

English sentiment was already developing the guilt-complex about the whole Treaty of Versailles which, among other factors, paralysed English foreign policy from Versailles to Munich. It would be interesting to speculate as to how much that guilt-complex was the result of the brilliant writing of John Maynard Keynes. Devastatingly accurate and

prophetic in its analysis of the economic aspects of the treaty, his *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* included the whole treaty in one sweeping condemnation as a "Carthaginian Peace," and his caricatures of the leading negotiators at Paris immediately fixed stereotypes which still affect much of the writing about the Paris Peace Conference.

Only too late did British and French leaders observe that Hitler was less concerned about rectification of the "injustices" of the *Diktat* of Versailles than with the conquest of Europe. The muddle and confusion in liberal and democratic communities about the real character of Versailles contributed to the stupidity of Allied policy from Versailles to Armageddon.

Source: Paul Birdsall, *Versailles Twenty Years After*, (1941), in I.J. Lederer (ed.), *The Versailles Settlement: Was It Foredoomed to Failure?* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co.), 1960.

* Carthaginian Peace refers to the complete destruction of the city state of Carthage by Rome in 202 BCE and 146 BCE. A "Carthaginian peace" is one where the enemy is completely destroyed and unable to rebuild.

Analysis and Evaluation

1. What does Keynes believe should have been the guiding motive when the Allies designed the treaty? Do you agree? Explain.
2. How would Keynes have settled the issue of German compensation for the war?
3. According to Birdsall what was the result of the fact that the US did not join the League?
4. What blame does Birdsall lay on Keynes' criticism of the treaty? Is this fair in your opinion? Explain.
5. Decide which of the viewpoints you tend to support and explain why. Be sure to use specific information from this textbook, the readings, and other sources to support your position. If you do not agree with either author, explain your own view.