

PEACE TREATIES AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR – A SOURCEWORK EXERCISE

1. People at the time

Source A - Count Brockdorff, head of the German delegation at Versailles

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...however, we emphatically deny that the German people should be seen as the only guilty party. Over 50 years the imperialism of all European states has poisoned the international situation.

Source B - J.M Keynes, the Economic Consequences of the Peace, 1919. Keynes resigned from his position as a British representative at the Paris Peace Conference.

In my opinion, it is impossible to lay the 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. The treaty, by overstepping the limits of the possible, has in practice settled nothing.

Source C - From a speech made by a German MP in the Reichstag in 1919.

The criminal madness of this peace will drain Germany's national life-blood. It is a shameless blow in the face of common-sense. It is inflicting the deepest wounds on us Germans as our world lies in wreckage about us.

Source D - Harold Nicolson, a representative at the Versailles conference

The historian, with every justification, will come to the conclusion that we were very stupid men... We arrived determined that a Peace of justice and wisdom should be negotiated; we left the conference conscious that the treaties imposed upon our enemies were neither just nor wise.

1. What were the main criticisms of the Treaty of Versailles that were made at the time?

2. Historians since

Source A – the historian Sally Marks

The Versailles Treaty was severe, but it is amazing that it is 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 it was.

Source B - Wolfgang Mommensen, historian, University of Dusseldorf

Basically, I think one can say the Treaty was harsh, but understandable...The allied governments were under the pressure of their own public which demanded the Germans to pay for it all.

Source C - Dr. Ruth Henig, historian, Lancaster University

Compared to the treaties which Germany had imposed on defeated Russia and Rumania in 1918, the Treaty of Versailles was quite moderate...The Treaty of Versailles was not excessively harsh on Germany, either territorially or economically. However, the German people were expecting victory not defeat. It was the acknowledgement of defeat as much as the treaty terms themselves, which they found so hard to accept.

Source D - W. Carr, A History of Germany, 1972.

Severe as the Treaty seemed to many Germans, it should be remembered that Germany might easily have fared much worse. If Clemenceau had had his way...the Rhineland would have become an independent state, the Saar would have been annexed to France, and Danzig would have become part of Poland.

Source E - John Sherer in *World War I*, 1980:

Of the former Empires shaken by the War, only the German Empire survived...alone of all the defeated nations it preserved its territorial unity. Germany was weakened, but not so weakened that it could not rise within a generation to threaten the balance of world power once again. The Empires of Old Europe had been swept away. The provisions of the victorious peace-makers failed to fill the vacuum. Millions died in vain.

Source F - John Terrain, in *The Mighty Continent*, 1976:

[The War Guilt Clause]: a stigma on an entire nation. This was a moral judgment which an entire nation felt entitled to resent. Schneidemann resigned, exclaiming: 'May the hand wither that signs this Treaty'. But there was nothing for it: Germany was powerless; sign she must.

Source G - Norman Lowe, *Mastering Modern World History* (1982)

The unwise thing about Versailles was that it annoyed the Germans yet did *not render them too weak to retaliate*. Gilbert White, an American delegate at the Conference, put it perfectly when he remarked that given the problems involved, 'it is not surprising that they made a bad peace; what is surprising is that they managed to make peace at all'.

Source H - From a modern school textbook.

In 1919 the German government was very fragile...for signing the Versailles Treaty, it was accused of "stabbing Germany in the back".

In 1922 Germany fell behind on reparations payments, so in 1923 French and Belgian troops entered the Ruhr and simply took what was owed to them in the form of raw materials and goods. The Germans responded with a policy of passive resistance (going on strike), which meant that the economy ground to a standstill. The government simply printed more money to make up the difference, which meant that the money quickly became worthless. We call this process hyperinflation.

Source I - Tony Macaleavy

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.

Germany complained that the Treaty was a "Diktat" - a dictated peace - and this was fair enough. However, to complain that the Treaty was not based on the 14 Points as promised was wrong. It was only at the last minute that they surrendered asking for the 14 Points to be applied, and by then they had shown how harsh they were by their treatment of Russia at Brest-Litovsk.

"Too Harsh or not Harsh Enough?" – Classroom debate

The historiographical debate

c.1919-29: Most commentators agreed that the Treaty of Versailles was fair and just given the amount of deaths that had been suffered.

c.1929-1935: The terrible impact of the Wall St. Crash upon Germany and the rise of Hitler persuaded many commentators to argue that maybe Germany needed to be "appeased" and so the Treaty of Versailles was criticised as being too harsh.

c.1935-45: Increasing Nazi Aggression led many to argue that the problem was not that the Treaty had been too harsh, but that it had not been harsh enough on Germany, who was mainly responsible for World War One. This view was vigorously argued by Fritz Fischer.

Task:

Your teacher will split you into two teams: one will argue that Versailles was too harsh, the other that it was not harsh enough.

1. Individual Task

Your initial job is to come up with three questions for the opposing team – designed to undermine their interpretation. For example, a member of team [1] could come up with a question for team [2] along the lines of "Is it not true that Germany got off lightly given that Clemenceau wanted to split the country into separate states?"

Start by reading through the sources on these pages. Highlight off any evidence which you think backs up your point.

2. Group Task

Now get into your teams to compare your questions. Settle on three – ideally each of these should approach the issue from a different angle (e.g. territory / war guilt / armaments / reparations) and write these into the appropriate column of the table.

3. Class Task

Your teacher will now ask each team to read out the questions they will be asking their opponents. These should be used to allow everyone to complete the blank question boxes in their table (available as a worksheet from www.activehistory.co.uk).

4. Trial

Each team should now split into three groups – one to prepare an answer for the first question, one to prepare an answer for the second, and one for the third.

When the teams are ready, they can provide their answers to the rest of the class, who can write them into the table. Your teacher may allow cross-examination of each speaker.