

The Versailles Treaty at 100: How It Affects the Modern World

June 28, 1919. It's a date we often overlook, but its impact is significant. On this date 100 years ago, Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles, her peace settlement for the First World War.

While the Treaty ended the British naval blockade, which starved millions of Germans to death, its terms were quite harsh. Germany was forced to pay 33 billion U.S. dollars (\$500 billion in today's money) for all damage done to Allied property and civilians.

Germany also lost more than a tenth of its population and more than 13 percent of its national territory. Millions of Germans were separated from the German nation and stuck in new artificial states like Czechoslovakia in which they were minorities treated as second-class citizens. German Austria was also barred from uniting with Germany proper, and the Rhineland was occupied by the Allies.

Finally, although not responsible for the outbreak of the conflict, Germany was forced to sign the "war-guilt" clause (Article 231 of the Treaty) that rested the blame for the war solely on German shoulders. This caused great resentment among the Germans, for it framed them as uniquely evil in history.

These castigations, although a century old, had serious repercussions, which continue down to our present world. Four of these include:

1. End of European Hegemony

The Versailles Treaty blacklisted Germany, destroying any chance they had at hegemony, the ability to have political dominance in a given territory. This was very different from the Treaty of Paris settlement at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, which brought France back into the fold of European nations as an equal. Germany was humiliated at Versailles, greatly reduced in territory, and burdened with an impossible sum of reparations payments.

However, not only German, but European power was greatly weakened. Greatly indebted to the U.S., the British and French began to show the first signs of their eventual collapse. Moreover, the material and spiritual weakness of the European powers was demonstrated with their inability to handle the rise of National Socialist Germany.

2. The Creation of a Liberal Democratic Europe

While some drastic changes were made after World War II, such as the ethnic cleansing of over 16 million Germans in Eastern Europe, the post-war settlement laid the general boundaries of modern-day Europe.

The war also destroyed the old conservative order in Europe. Powerful monarchies and aristocracies were eliminated, and liberal democracy became the norm in European affairs, partly through American influence.

3. Beginnings of the American Order

World War I destroyed the might of the British, French, and Italian victors, while vanquishing the Germans, Russians, and Ottomans. Across the Atlantic, the U.S. was relatively

untouched by the war, having entered only in the final year. This was repeated in World War II, leaving the U.S. in position to be the world's leader.

This leadership played out in part through The League of Nations. While originally rejected by the Republican Senate, Woodrow Wilson's brainchild proved to be the model for the international order established in 1945, the United Nations.

4. The Treaty's Impact on the Rise of Communism and National Socialism

With Britain and France undermining the new German Republic at its inception, the German people never viewed the post-World War I regime as fully legitimate, associating it with the humiliation imposed by the West. These grievances made the German people look to radical solutions, such as national socialism or communism.

In retrospect, had the Versailles Treaty given more power to Germany and worked to create an anti-Soviet front, it is likely that the USSR and bolshevism would have been wiped out early in the twentieth century. Instead, the Treaty of Versailles created a desire to reclaim lost lands, leading Germans to believe they had legitimate claims on neighboring territories. This led to the Second World War, and with the Soviet conquest of Eastern Europe, caused the spread of communism on a global scale.

Hence, the Treaty of Versailles is a defining event in the twentieth century, as it formalized the rise of a liberal democratic world led by the U.S., while maneuvering the world to a point where national socialism, and later communism were dominant forces in the twentieth century.

The centennial of the Treaty is an opportunity to reflect on its influence, and learn from the course of history. Are we

willing to learn from the mistakes of history to avoid them in future conflicts?

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