

Treaty of Versailles

The Treaty of Versailles was a peace document signed between Imperial Germany and the Allied Powers on 28th June 1919. The treaty ended the state of war that had existed between Germany and the Allies from 1914 and brought World War I to an end.

The treaty gets its name from the Palace of Versailles where it was signed

This article will further cover the terms and implication of the Treaty of Versailles that will be useful for the world history segment of the UPSC mains exam.

Background of the Treaty of Versailles

World War I had broken out in July 1914 upon the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The resulting conflict had pitted Britain, France, Russia along with their colonies, against the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Ottoman Empire and the German Empire.

The war had been fought into a stalemate by 1918, but the Central Powers (the term with which the Ottomans, Austro-Hungarian and German factions were known by) were planning an offensive with the entry of the United States into the war against them. Seeking to swiftly put the conflict to an end before American troops landed in Europe, Germany took the initiative to begin an offensive that would end the war in the Central Powers favour.

The offensive failed. Instead, the Allies won decisively on the battlefield and forced an armistice in November 1918 that resembled a surrender.

In a speech to the United States Congress in January 1918, President Woodrow Wilson laid out his vision for an idealistic post-war European society. They were known as the Fourteen Points. The Fourteen Points laid the groundwork for self-determination for Europe's ethnic population and the groundwork for a multinational organization that would mediate any future disputes and prevent large-scale conflicts. The organization became known as the League of Nations (it would be dissolved on April 20, 1946)

A brief summary of the Fourteen Points are given below:

1. There would be no secret treaties between two warring nations. Diplomacy between them would be a matter of public record
2. The free navigations of the seas would be inclusive to all the nations.

3. There would be no economic barriers between countries. Free trade would be the norm
4. All nations should abstain from an arms race with a view to enhance public safety.
5. Claims regarding colonies should be fair and impartial.
6. Restoration of territories lost by Russia
7. Belgium should be granted freed as was the case before 1914
8. The region of Alsace-Lorraine should be returned to France
9. Italy's frontiers should be drawn keeping nationalities recognizable
10. The various ethnic groups of the Austro-Hungarian Empire must be given a right to self-determination
11. The Balkan states should also be guaranteed self-determination and independence.
12. Turks and those under Turkish rule should be granted self-determination.
13. An independent Poland should be created.
14. A general association of nations must be formed to mediate international disputes.

When the armistice was signed by the German leaders on November 11 1918, they assumed that a future peace treaty would be formulated on the basis of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points. Future events would prove otherwise.

The signing of the Treaty of Versailles

The treaty of Versailles would be drafted during the Paris Peace Conference on January 18, 1919. The significance of this date was not lost on those who were in attendance. The date marked the anniversary of the coronation of Wilhelm I who was declared Emperor of Germany in the very halls of the Versailles at the very end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. The war also saw the loss of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany.

Therefore, the French considered it fitting to avenge their humiliating loss on the very same date and at the very same place it happened with the new peace treaty that had been drawn up

The peace negotiations were helmed by Woodrow Wilson of the United States, Lloyd George of Britain, Georges Clemenceau of France and Vittorio Orlando of Italy. They were collectively known as the "Big Four", all through the role played by Italy was limited. Germany and other defeated parties of the Central Powers were not represented. Nor was Russia which had concluded a peace treaty in secret with Germany despite being a part of the Allied camp

In retrospect, the 'Big Four' were not on the same page regarding the peace treaty. Each had their own objectives which were in conflict with that of the other

1. The French wanted to prevent any future attacks by Germany and for this, they sought to economically weaken it by paying heavy reparations.
2. The British wanted to rebuild Germany in order to gain a strong trading partner
3. The Italians wanted to expand their power and influence in post-war Europe so that they would be at an equal footing with that of other European powers
4. The Americans opposed any territorial changes and sought to implement a world order that was in line with the Fourteen Points. Other European leaders considered the Fourteen Points as too unrealistic to translate into policy

Ultimately the European Allies imposed a harsh treaty by forcing Germany to surrender all of its overseas colonies and 10 % of its land.

Other aspects of the treaty are as follows:

1. Germany would limit the size of its army and navy and was not allowed to maintain an air force.
2. It called for Kaiser Wilhelm II, ruler of Germany, to stand trial for war crimes
3. Above all, it included the "war guilt clause" which held Germany solely responsible for starting the war and required it to pay reparations for Allied war losses

Impact of the Treaty of Versailles

World War I had begun when a Serb nationalist, Gavrilo Princip, assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo. Gavrilo was a member of the Black Hand, a Serb nationalistic group with the aim of uniting Serbs living outside the Kingdom of Serbia. This had prompted the Austro-Hungarian Empire to declare war on Serbia and in return Serbia's allies declared war on the Austro-Hungarian Empire, thus sparking the war.

The German people were furious that this fact was ignored by the Allies and Germany was made the sole party responsible for all the horrors of World War I. The nation's burden of reparations crossed 132 billion gold Reichsmarks. It was a sum so huge that economists like John Maynard Keynes pointed out that Germany would not be able to pay it in full and even if by chance that it did, the European economy would collapse.

The economic hardship and the resentment of the treaty within Germany were fertile grounds for ultra-nationalist sentiments, which were exploited by Hitler and his Nazi Party to seize power and laid the groundwork for World War II, a conflict far deadlier and devastating than World War I had ever been.

