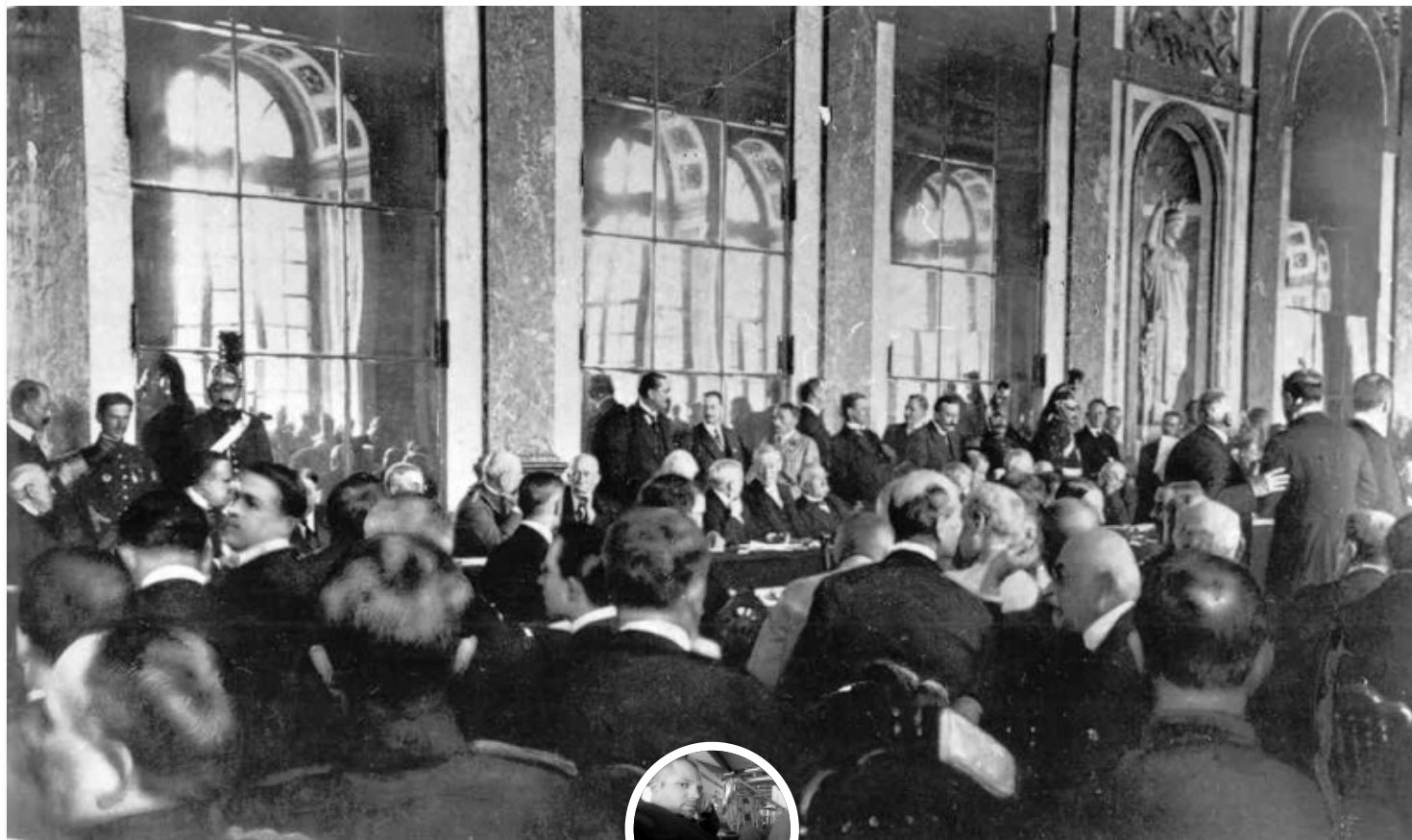


History

# The Failure of the Treaty of Versailles

by AJ Powell 10 Comments 14 min read

Written by [AJ Powell](#)

The first Great War was actually started by Austria-Hungary, but Germany's support of the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the war led to them being seen as the primary antagonist. In the end, France demanded that Germany accept nearly all blame for everything. This hatred, combined with both selfishness and a complete lack of leadership from the statesmen present, led to the drafting of a treaty that imposed such impossible odds against the German people, that it is of no surprise German resentment grew at such an astonishing rate post WWI. To understand the failures of the Treaty of Versailles then is to understand the very underlying reasons for the buildup towards yet another great war 20 years later.

This is a historical analysis that discusses why the Treaty of Versailles was a failure. In reading this analysis, it is important to ask, what lessons can we learn from this period of the past that leadership(s) seem to be repeating today, and what lessons can we take with us on our own path? We will discuss this bit of history for the purpose of discovering such thoughts, and we will start by asking three particular questions for which to guide the analysis:

1. Why was Germany blamed for the war?
2. What were the primary and ulterior motives held by the drafters of the treaty?

3. How did a complete lack of leadership and hidden agendas work to destroy what could have stood a chance at preventing yet another world war?

Now, these questions are guides, and the reason is that, upon conclusion of our assessment, we will ask a series of entirely new questions designed to prompt critical thinking, and then use this new knowledge to apply towards our own advancement of self-improvement.

Upon conclusion of this analysis, take a few moments to carefully consider the questions at the end, **then share your thoughts in the comments below** so the community may benefit from open discussion.

The first Great War was devastating, not simply in terms of physical and economic destruction, but as the single greatest loss of human life in modern history by that time. At its end, 37.5 million casualties – including 8.5 million deaths in Europe alone – left much of the world adrift in loss and turmoil. Entire generations of life lay in the fields crossing the expanses of the European continent, lost at the birth of modern warfare's bitter regrets in ineffective leadership, ill-conceived strategies, and the horrors of chemical warfare. Cast to the depths along with it was the moral of entire nations worth of people, who themselves at one point came to believe a solution may never have been found. At its closing, we see not the same careful considerations once thought about over France's former trespasses, but instead the bitterness and resentfulness of state actors as they bickered and quarreled for selfish desires at the spoils of war. For some, Germany was to be treated with unrelenting harshness, for others, it was foreseen that far too harsh desires could drive the world into yet another conflict, and still others thought only of the potential gains they might scoop up in the negotiating madness. It is here, in the summer of 1919, that we set the stage for what would be the locomotive like motivation to which eventually hurled the world into yet another Great War.

Nationalistic and self-entitlement driven statesmen from around the world converged on Paris by January of 1919 to begin deliberations that would hammer out the details of how the world would deal with the defeated rogue nations. Five separate treaties were to come over the following years, the most important of which – combined with a newly minted world organization – would determine the fate of Europe only two decades later. The Treaty of Versailles (1919) was the settlement of peace that brought the war to a close against Germany. Yet again, like a reflection of the Congress of Vienna, the Paris Peace Conference was an affair of immeasurable complexity and responsibility, all wrapped up into a stately socialized event. Also similar to previous convergences, do we see the drive of selfish desires on many sides, creating the worst atmosphere possible for the birth of effective and accepted standards. Everyone wanted their own little piece of the pie, everyone had their own demands, and like that famous Congress in Vienna, appeasement soon became the bargaining tool needed to make ground of any kind.

Wilson (the President of the United States), Lloyd George (the Prime Minister of Great Britain), Clemenceau (the Prime Minister of France), and Orlando (the Prime Minister of Italy), comprised "the Big Four", the most prominent actors at the stage, and the ultimate decision-makers concerning finalizations to the whole process. Wilson was favored as the leader of idealistic values many held important to them at the time, and his arrival was championed at the hails of many, but his views were compromised by Clemenceau nearly every step of the way, forcing Wilson to make concessions. Wilson believed strongly in a great notion of the age, the advancement of a new form of diplomacy that required the institutionalization of a super-national organization that upheld an international standard of law. His goal was the creation of such an organization, however, the sheer amount of opinionated selfishness he encountered at the conference itself made it near impossible for Wilson to fully realize his ideals. Instead, he quickly understood the only way he would ever make ground was to compromise his position again, and again, and again...

Of course the goal of the conference was the settlement of matters in the wake of the war. National lines needed to be drawn, agreements reached, damages assessed, and like all treaty matters, political agreements made in order to secure a measure of peace. But with so many mountains to move on so many different fronts, Wilson – and indeed, every party present – found themselves navigating a field of landmines. Sacrifices needed to be made if any progress was to come, and no bigger an obstacle was there than France.

Clemenceau couldn't care less what Wilson wanted, in fact, he needn't concern himself with the matters many sought. Typical to the average perception of French fashion, he cared not about the concerns of others, only the matters that were important to him. Clemenceau was a product of the previous era, of French defeat in 1870, and to him, the conference was more than a simple personal matter, it was an opportunity for vengeance. He saw it as his golden opportunity to get back at Germany through the use of power. Clemenceau's concerns were well-known, *the safety and security of France!*, was his top priority. Unlike the majority of attending parties, who – while themselves did retain certain levels of greed – cared greatly for the safety of all, and whose primary concerns were larger than themselves (stabilization of the continent, restoration of infrastructure, rebuilding of lives, etc.), Clemenceau's motives spoke volumes to his personal character... "Screw everyone else, France is the *only* thing that matters", we can only conceive might have been his mental thoughts.

Clemenceau wanted a safe and secure France, safe from the Germans, which, in all reality, was a greatly – and perhaps purposely vengeful – misplaced subject of blame. While Germany did indeed go along with the actions Austria-Hungary took that started the war, and there is no doubt that German actions during the war were well beyond a level of detestable inhumanity, Germany was still secondary to the war's beginning, and therefore should have only received part of the blame. Yet Clemenceau, blinded by his personal ties to the past, made it out to be that Germany was one hundred percent at fault for everything, as if it was his own little personal agenda the whole time. To him, the only way it would ever be possible to keep France safe was to damage Germany as much as humanly possible. His goals were to weaken Germany to the point that it could never again rise up to become a power of any kind. He wanted the German people to suffer, economically, politically, and perhaps even personally. This was a major problem, and during the Paris Peace Conference itself, a keystone of disagreement that severely hindered negotiations.

Many of the attendees knew that Clemenceau's demands were wrong. The limitations placed in those very ideas would have damaging reverse effects, and could eventually lead to yet another up-rising of misguided nationalistic pride – this time built on pure hate and resentment. And indeed, that is exactly what happened many years later, but we will get to that. The problematic theme throughout the entire conference was navigating an ocean of self-centeredness. In the end, the statesmen's willingness to use compromise in the form of appeasement to the demands of others – while enabling them to ultimately conclude the conference – finalized in measures that were weak and ineffective. While Wilson did get his *League of Nations*, for example, its formation came at a large cost.

The treaty itself included a large number of provisions. Alsace-Lorraine was to be returned to France, any areas containing Polish populations had to be returned to Poland, and Germany had to give up all its colonies. The German Army was thereafter limited to 100,000 total service members, all of which must be volunteers, and was not authorized to maintain aircraft, tanks or any weapon of an aggressive nature. This not only meant that future production of such things was strictly prohibited, but it was demanded for the remaining inventories still in German hands to be handed over as well. The German Navy was given completely over to the British, ships were restricted in both total number and tonnage, and not one single submarine was allowed. The Germans had, however, scuttled a great many ships by this time already. Furthermore, the German Officers School was completely abolished in an effort to prevent future military leadership training and education.

The largest, and by any right, most damaging, part of the Treaty of Versailles was article 231. Article 231 made vast generalizations over the placement of blame for the war, stating that *Germany* and her "allies" were directly responsible for all loss and damages of any kind suffered by all Allied and Associated Governments. As such, Article 231 openly declared in the broadest sense possible, that Germany was the sole focus of blame, and therefore, should be the sole subject of consequence and acceptance of responsibility for compensation. While the conference had great difficulty in finalizing an assessment for the total amount of money Germany would end up paying for in damages, at least one amount – in the manner of \$5 billion – was pending. However, the remaining parts of the treaty stripped Germany of any future possibility to fulfill those obligations.

Germany was not only forced into the treaty at dictated terms, but now was forced into supporting a lingering occupation. Large regions of German territory key to its financial security were under occupational

control, its marine and mass transportation shipping assets were taken over, and it was required to literally give away natural resources to many other nations. It was more than expected that Germany fulfill the treaty's demands, but how could a nation be expected to fulfill obligations while attempting to take care of itself, if those obligations strip its ability to care for itself in the first place? This stranglehold created by the massive condemnation of Germany itself – to include every citizen – effectively started the stir of resentment many at the conference were so worried about in the first place. In fact, the Treaty of Versailles' terms were so harsh against the German people, that it is often criticized as the very reason for the rise of Nazism later on. That if only the terms were changed, blame correctly divided amongst all the aggressors, or the selfishness of the statesmen held at bay, and truly effective measures allowed to be created, then it is possible WWII may never have occurred.

However, it was the personal mission of Clemenceau to destroy Germany from the inside out. The French demanded a *forever-crippled* Germany, totally disarmed and economically weak. The other members knew that such terms would only lead to more conflict, and in their concessions to make any progress at all, the treaty eventually became weak and ineffective. Neither destructive nor generous, it was half-hearted at best and a personal agenda-filled document of vengeance at worst. Yet, to say that the war did not create some level of resentment near reflective of the French amongst the other Allies would be inaccurate. However, their focus became a method to counteract the French ambition, and the conference was therefore compromised from ever producing a strong product.

At its conclusion, Wilson eventually did get his League of Nations, but Germany was never allowed to join, violating the very rules of the League itself. Furthermore, it is of importance to note that the United States never joined the worldwide organization it championed into creating in the first place. In fact, the United States, Trans-Jordan, Arabia, Madagascar, and even the Philippines were never members, and Russia was eventually thrown out. The League was formed at the principles of national self-determination, freedom of the seas, removal of economic restrictions, cooperation, democracy, and openness and clarity of foreign relations (for example, the abolishment of secret treaties). But the League was a complete failure. It could neither prevent future aggression nor preserve peace. Its faults lay with undermining its formative rules of inclusion and a complete lack of ability to enforce them, the requirement of participation to enforce standards, a lack of force projection, and the requirement of unanimous agreement in action. At its very beginning it had no teeth, and everyone knew it. Wilson's brave new diplomacy was compromised to progress the Treaty of Versailles, and it was all these factors combined that set the tone for the following war by 1939.

Of course the Germans resented it all! After all, this was a nation divided even before the end of the war. New political leadership had taken over, and due to previous promises with the United States on the foundations of Wilson's Fourteen Points, Germany had grown to expect it would be treated in a "somewhat" *fair* manner. Instead, the dictated terms of a treaty drafted in their absence at a conference they were neither represented at nor invited to, hammered their society economically, socially, and morally. Crushed under the new weight of bias, discrimination, and the coldness of treatment wrote into the terms of the treaty, the Germans themselves felt largely betrayed. And they had a valid point to be sure, for they were never even aware of the changes that occurred as the conference progressed.

No, the Allies, finding themselves largely unprepared to dictate terms at the war's end, neither agreed, nor produced an effective product. As such, the treaty was unable to solve the underlying problems that plagued the continent, and to which would rise up again years later. Squabbling, selfishness, and appeasement became the crippling blows to the treaty's possible success, and its harshness was far too much for any rational person to accept. It was only a matter of time then, after the conclusion of the conference, in which a matter of social resentment would soon grow out of the aftermath of WWI. Had personal and self-absorbed nationalistic motivations been set-aside by the major actors drafting the treaty, a workable and effective product could have been created. By its very nature, it might have been possible to avoid setting in motion future social issues leading up to another world war. Instead, the product dictated generated the exact opposite effect, and further enhancing it was secondary effects from the new world organization created to control them. There is no doubt that Germany's exclusion from both the Paris Peace Conference and the League of Nations contributed to the rise of Nazism, and therefore, no doubt that the Big-4 set themselves up for failure as a result.

# Questions to Ponder:

1. Why is this important to history?
2. Why is it important to understand how selfish agendas can destroy teamwork?
3. Who was ACTUALLY responsible for starting WWI, and why is that important?
4. What lessons can we learn that apply to our advancement of “Globalized Leadership”?
5. How do you think you could apply those lessons to your own professional environment today?
6. Can you think of events in recent history that share similarities found within this analysis?
7. What are the effects?

Post YOUR replies in the [comments section below](#) so the community can discuss these thoughts openly.

## References:

Gilbert, Felix and Large, David C. (2009). *The End of The European Era – 1890 to the Present*. Sixth Edition. W.W. Norton & Company, New York | London.

[Historical Analysis](#) [History](#) [International Relations](#) [Politics](#) [Treaty of Versailles](#)

## About the author



### AJ Powell

AJ is a retired U.S. Army NCO who served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. He is a combat veteran, and has participated in contingency operations around the world. AJ is the Owner of Veteran Leadership Solutions, the Founder and Editor in Chief of The Warfighter Journal, and is a published Sociological Analyst, Researcher, Guest Lecturer, and Public Speaker. He is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a focus on Sociology and a science degree in Organizational Leadership, and is published in the field of sociology. AJ is an inductive analyst; public figure; researcher/writer; aviator; a certified advanced operational diver; professional instructor, trainer, mentor, and adviser; snowboarder; motorcycle rider; world traveler; he enjoys long distance endurance events, and much more.