

## Historiography of The Treaty - sources

1. What then is the Treaty of Versailles? It is an unparalleled and predatory peace, which has made slaves of tens of millions of people, including the most civilised. This is no peace, but terms dictated to a defenceless victim by armed robbers.

Lenin, in a speech to Political Conference of Workers, Soldiers and Villagers in October 1920

2. The Versailles Peace Treaty was designed to perpetuate the repartition of the capitalist world in favour of the victor countries, and to establish a system of relationships between countries aimed at strangling Soviet Russia and suppressing the revolutionary movement throughout the world.

Endnote gloss by the Stalinist editor of a Plan of a Speech by Lenin to the TU Conference (1921).

A modern Marxist historian comments on this statement: 'The editors were over-focused on the Russia, making Russia the center of their universe. These guys were probably writing under Stalin's eye'.

3. The policy of reducing Germany to servitude for a generation, of degrading the lives of millions of human beings, and of depriving a whole nation of happiness, should be abhorrent and detestable.... Nations are not authorised, by religion or by natural morals, to visit on the children of their enemies the misdoings of parents or of rulers....

The Treaty includes no provisions for the economic rehabilitation of Europe - nothing to make the defeated Central Empires into good neighbours, nothing to stabilise the new States of Europe, nothing to reclaim Russia... The Council of Four paid no attention to these issues, being preoccupied with others - Clemenceau to crush the economic life of his enemy, Lloyd George to bring home something that would pass muster for a week, the President to do nothing that was not just and right....

JM Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919)

4. 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.

Harold Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919* (1933)

5. Not stern, but actually punitive.... The real crime is the reparations and indemnity chapter, which is immoral and senseless. There is not a single person among the younger people here who is not unhappy and disappointed at the terms. The only people who approve are the old fire-eaters.

Harold Nicolson, letter to his father, quoted in his *Diary* (8 June 1919)

Nicolson was a British delegate at Versailles

6. Had a talk with Barnes [one of the British officials]. In his view the villain of the Treaty was Wilson, who had proved himself to be anything but a strong man, and a child in the hands of Clemenceau, who, as Barnes put it, 'could buy him at one end of the street and sell him at the other'.... Barnes had written several times to the PM protesting about the terms of the Peace Treaty especially the Reparation Clauses..

Thomas Jones, *Whitehall Diary* (2 July 1919)

Jones was Assistant Secretary in the War Cabinet

7. It is not statesmanship. It is not business. It is not common sense. It is not the clean Peace by which I always meant, and other people meant, to end war with the war.

HH Asquith, former Prime Minister, campaigning for election in 1920

8. One of the main defects in the Treaty of Versailles was that it did not define the total liability of Germany; at that time estimates of this liability ranged from between £15,000 million and £25,000 million, and sums of this magnitude greatly exceeded Germany's capacity to pay....

The war had been fought to destroy German militarism; but the Treaty ensured that it should be reborn.

Herbert Asquith, *Moments of Memory*  
Written in the 1930s by HH Asquith's son.

9. Mr. Baker traces the fight of the American delegation against the secret treaties, censorship, and the domination of the conference by the military hangers-on. He shows in detail its struggle for the League of Nations – Mr. Wilson's irreducible minimum, the incorporation of the league in the treaties, the use of English as an official language, the mandate system, disarmament, the abolition of conscription, and a small and definite reparations sum. In making this struggle, Mr. Wilson fought alone. Of course, he received no help from Clemenceau and very little from Lloyd George, who is painted as the worst kind of an opportunist.

When one reads these volumes, he draws the impression that European diplomats are mostly scoundrels and that American diplomats are mostly saints.

From a review by RL Buell (1923) of *Wilson & the World Settlement*

10. The President came immediately into contact with personalities who were certainly his equals in force and experience. The glowing if nebulous ideas he may have cherished of haranguing the Old World into a nobler way of life and of marshalling to his support—if necessary over the heads of their own chosen leaders—the public opinions of the various countries, must now give place to silk and steel conversations with Clemenceau and Lloyd George.

In contrast to President Wilson's isolation from the Senate, it was Lloyd George's policy to fortify himself at important moments by the counsel and agreement of the leaders of the whole British Empire. This was his Senate, and he moved through the darkness and confusion of the Paris firmament always surrounded by numerous [skilled advisers]. Himself singularly free from that perversion of the historic sense which degenerates into egotism, the Prime Minister parcelled out great functions and occasions among his colleagues and those whom he wished to persuade or conciliate; and by modesty in good fortune preserved intact his own controlling power.

Winston Churchill, *The Aftermath* (1929)

11. The Treaties were never given a chance by the miscellaneous and unimpressive array of second-rate statesmen who have handled them for the past 15 years.... The failure of a great deal of what is best and noblest in the Treaties has been entirely due to the fact that there has been no will-power or steady resolve behind their execution...

All of [the 1919 peacemakers] would be especially shocked at the spectacle of the great democratic countries, which in 1919 commanded universal respect, now shivering and begging for peace on the door-step of two European dictators.

David Lloyd George, *Memoirs of the Peace Treaty* (1938)

12. A great opportunity had been missed. The statesmen had not been equal to the grandeur of events. They had made a peace which was no peace... Human nature, it was widely felt, had failed. Europe had not been made safe for democracy. The bright exhilaration of victory was soon blotted by the fog of disillusion, resentment, and despair...

H.A.L.Fisher, *A History of Europe* (1938)

13. Though the Germans accepted the treaty in the formal sense of agreeing to sign it, none took the signature seriously. The treaty seemed to them to be wicked, unfair, dictation, a slave treaty. All Germans intended to repudiate it at some time in the future, if it did not fall to pieces of its own absurdity.

AJP Taylor, *The History of the First World War* (1963)

14. Germany was still the strongest power in Europe economically, so that the unwise thing about Versailles was that it annoyed the Germans yet did *not render them too weak to retaliate*.

Norman Lowe, *Mastering Modern World History* (1982)

*Mastering Modern World History* was a GCSE History revision book.

15. Above all, Lloyd George feared the spread of communism in Europe. Obviously, it didn't make sense to make Germany so poor that more of her people would be driven into the arms of her home-grown Bolsheviks.

Tony Howarth, *Twentieth Century History* (1979)

16. Certainly there was much fear of Bolshevism, though its direct influence on the peace settlement was probably less than some writers have argued...

Meanwhile the internal threat from Bolshevism had subsided without the need for any direct action by the Conference... In the ideological propaganda battle which Lenin and Wilson had conducted since November 1917 for the hearts of the peoples of Europe, Wilson had emerged as the clear victor.

Hugh Seton Watson, *1919 and the Persistence of Nationalist Aspirations* (1989)

17. The simple textbook interpretation of American and British policy is fundamentally misleading ... while grand and overly broad interpretations of the peace conference might have made people feel good about their political values, they have also prevented scholars from understanding what actually happened.

Clearly, the historiography of the peace conference has shifted its focus: the most important works now try to place the diplomacy of the peace conference in a broader context by stressing the role of both Bolshevism and domestic politics.

Marc Trachtenberg, *Versailles after Sixty Years* (1982)

18. The boundaries drawn in 1919 represented "the closest approximation of an ethnographic map of Europe that has ever been achieved." And it must not be forgotten – although it has been by most – that a genuine effort was made to safeguard the rights of those ethnic minorities that were caught within the frontiers of states dominated by other national groups.

In short, here was a commitment – however imperfect, and however ineffective as it turned out – to what we would today call "multiculturalism."

William R. Keylor, *A Re-Evaluation Of The Versailles Peace* (1995)

Dr. William R. Keylor was Chair History and professor of international relations at Boston University.

19. In conclusion it has to be said that this collection of peace treaties was *not a conspicuous success*. But it is easy to criticise after the event. 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'.

Norman Lowe, *Mastering Modern World History* (1982)

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20. The treaty makes sense only if we view it as part of the frightful time from which it emerged. When we review the conflicting perceptions of reality separating victor from defeated, only pure, blind luck could have led to a lasting peace in 1919. Albert I of Belgium has been credited with the most sensible verdict on the peace conference of 1919: "What would you have?" He is quoted as having said. "They did the best they could." And they did. From our point of vantage we can be generous and thank them for giving us the League, and the precedent of popular consultation on issues [i.e. 'plebiscites'] that had not been attended by democratic ritual before.

World War II overshadowed these modest gains, but it did not invalidate them, and in its wake, some of the mistakes of 1919, at any rate, were not repeated. What would you have? This is the laborious way in which mankind occasionally makes progress.

Dr Hans Schmitt of the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia State University (1989)

21. If [the peacemakers of 1919] could have done better, they certainly could have done much worse. They tried, even cynical old Clemenceau, to build a better order. They not foresee the future and they certainly could not control it. That was up to their successors. When war came in 19139, it was the result of twenty years of decisions taken or not taken, not of arrangements made in 1919.

Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers* (2003)

Margaret MacMillan, great granddaughter of Lloyd George, was Professor of History at University of Toronto, Canada

22. The Treaty of Versailles, which the Allies signed with Germany at the end of the First World War, has had a bad reputation ever since. John Maynard Keynes, the great economist, thought it was stupid, vindictive and short-sighted and most writers of history and the public have followed his lead ever since. Many people have blamed the treaty for driving Germany into misery, for creating the circumstances which led to the rise of Hitler, and ultimately for producing another World War in 1939. But historians must keep on looking at the evidence and re-evaluating the past and the time has come to take another look at that treaty. It is my own view – and a number of historians who have been working in this area for some years – that the treaty was not all that bad. Germany did lose the war after all. Reparations apparently imposed a heavy burden but Germany only paid a portion of what it owed. Perhaps the real problem was that the treaty was never really properly enforced so that Germany was able to rebuild its military and challenge the security of Europe all over again.

A private communication to [www.johndclare.net](http://www.johndclare.net) from Margaret MacMillan (2004)

23. Those who complain that Lloyd George did not gain Germany easier terms, that Wilson "failed", or that Clemenceau obtained too little forget that none of them had unilateral power of decision. To avoid irreparable schism and achieve a treaty, mutual concessions were essential. The resulting text was too gentle to restrict Germany for long but severe enough to enrage it permanently, creating a potentially explosive situation frightening France and Weimar's new weak neighbors.

A treaty satisfying everybody was impossible. Even a treaty satisfying a single great power was unlikely. So the Versailles treaty was and is unpopular.

Sally Marks, *Mistakes and Myths: The Allies, Germany, and the Versailles Treaty, 1918–1921* (2013)

Sally Marks was Professor of History, Rhode Island College.

24. Keynes's assessment of the Versailles Treaty was flawed from the beginning [and] Keynes himself regretted having written it. Germany's deliberately misinterpreted the Fourteen Points that stood at the heart of the matter. Claims that the German empire lost 13 per cent of its territory and 10 per cent of its population are based on phony statistics. Article 231 of the treaty, the much maligned 'war guilt paragraph', did not assign war guilt to Germany. Above all, it was not the 'burden' caused by reparation demands that stood behind the calamitous collapse of the Weimar economy which accompanied the massive defection of middle-class voters to the Nazi Party from the late 1920s onward.

It is true that 'the war to end all wars' — as a legion of hack novelists, moviemakers, singers, and textbook-writers have lamented — did not end all wars. But that was not the fault of the peacemakers.

Jurgen Tampke, *A Perfidious Distortion of History* (2017)