

## Topic 8.4: The Treaty of Versailles

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

World War I was the most horrific war Europe had ever experienced due to the use of military technologies created as a result of the Second Industrial Revolution. Allied leaders gathered in Paris to attempt to construct a postwar order.

### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The **Treaty of Versailles**, although designed to prevent another world war, had the unintended consequence of creating political and economic upheavals that led to the rise of dictatorships. An unstable peace would last only two decades.

### KEY TERMS

#### Fourteen Points

President Woodrow Wilson proposed a peace plan that included such principles as freedom of the seas, free trade, self-determination of peoples, reduction of arms, and the creation of a League of Nations.

#### Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles

In order to satisfy British and French demands that Germany be blamed and punished for starting the war, Germany was forced to agree to Article 231 (the “War Guilt Clause”), which held Germany responsible for the conflict.

#### The League of Nations

The Treaty of Versailles created the League of Nations, which provided the first permanent international forum for the promotion of world peace. The League struggled and ultimately failed to prevent another war.

### CAUSE AND EFFECT

Some **causes** of the Treaty of Versailles include:

The Treaty of Versailles was the result of Woodrow Wilson’s idealistic attempt to prevent another war and other Allied powers’ desire to limit Germany’s warmaking capacity.

Some **effects** of the Treaty of Versailles include:

Germany’s economy suffered under the financial burdens placed on it by the Treaty of Versailles. Resentments among the German population ultimately led to the rejection of liberal democracy and the rise of the Nazi dictatorship.

### THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE

In 1919, representatives of the Allied powers gathered in Paris to establish a postwar peace settlement. **Woodrow Wilson**, the president of the United States, took an active leadership role, seeking to shape the peace on the model of his **Fourteen Points**, which called for a “peace without victory.” British and French leaders, who represented nations that had lost many more lives in the war, saw Wilson’s plans as too idealistic. They had more practical goals of punishing Germany and reducing its warmaking capacity. The resulting compromise was the **Treaty of Versailles**, which began with Wilson’s Fourteen Points but also included clauses such as **Article 231**, which blamed Germany for the war, and provisions requiring Germany to pay **reparations** to compensate Britain and France for their wartime losses.



### THE STRUGGLES OF WEIMAR GERMANY

The German Empire collapsed with Germany’s defeat, resulting in the creation of the **Weimar Republic**, a parliamentary democracy that struggled under the economic obligations of the Treaty of Versailles. **Hyperinflation** plagued the German economy as the German mark became as worthless as printed paper. The **Ruhr Crisis** resulted from Germany’s failure to make its reparations payments, which prompted France and Belgium to occupy Germany’s Ruhr region until the United States intervened and pressured France to agree to the Dawes Plan.



A German using one-million-mark currency notes as notepaper (German Federal Archive)

### THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

The **League of Nations** was an international organization created by the Treaty of Versailles in order to provide a permanent forum for international cooperation and peace. The League suffered early blows to its credibility with the United States refusing to join and Germany not being allowed to join for several years.

The Treaty of Versailles set the stage for **decolonization** by stripping Germany and the Ottoman Empire of their imperial possessions in Africa and the Middle East. These former imperial lands were given to France and Britain to govern as **mandates** on behalf of the League of Nations. The arbitrarily-drawn boundaries of these mandates in the Middle East became the boundaries of several contemporary Arab states, setting the stage for ongoing conflicts in the oil-rich region.