

How Did the Versailles Treaty Help Cause World War II?

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It is hard to say anything good about World War I. Fought mainly in western and eastern Europe, it was a war that took the lives of over 10 million soldiers and seven million civilians, and wounded 10 million more. It was a war where men charged one another, again and again, through a storm of machine gun fire and **mustard gas** only to find themselves, months later, lying in the same God-forsaken trenches they had dug one year before.

The main **combatants** in this war included the major nations of Europe – Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey on the one side – France, England, Russia, and Italy on the other. The reason for the war was, at bottom, a struggle for economic and political power. It grew out of the scramble for overseas colonies, ethnic and national pride, and a tangle of alliances that said “I’ll help you if you help me.” It was a war coaxed into being by a huge military build-up. England was determined not be outdone by anyone else’s navy; Germany was determined not to be outgunned by anybody else’s army. By 1914 a tense Europe bristled with weapons.



An assassination in the Balkans triggered the actual fighting and the devastation followed. In 1917, after three years of indecision, the United States entered on the side of England and France and it was enough to tip the balance. By the summer of 1918 Germany was ready to give up. Ironically, little if any of the war had been fought on German soil. Most of the **carnage** had occurred on the **Western Front** in France and Belgium and on the **Eastern Front** near and in Russia. The result was that many of the German people, due to the government’s control of the press, had not known they were losing. Thinking that the war was no worse than a draw, they would not be prepared for a harsh peace.

The war ended on November 11, 1918. It was only a few months before leaders from around the world would meet at Versailles in France to hammer out a treaty. The major players were Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau of France, Prime Minister David Lloyd George of England, and Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States. Germany was given no voice. Russia, who had pulled out of the war in 1917, was not represented.

Woodrow Wilson wanted the treaty to guarantee independence for many of the national groups in Eastern Europe. He also wanted to create a **League of Nations** to settle future disputes and avoid war. But neither of these ideas was primary to Georges Clemenceau. France had suffered terribly in the war. Clemenceau wanted Germany to pay – in gold, in land, in resources, and in reduced military strength. His goal was that Germany should never rise again to threaten France or the rest of Europe. David Lloyd George agreed with Clemenceau. However, one of the English representatives, John Maynard Keynes, argued that the terms imposed on Germany were impossible for her to meet, and would lead to bitterness and future conflict. Wilson shared this thinking. In the end, Clemenceau and Lloyd George won out.

Keynes and Wilson were right about a future conflict. World War II, even more deadly than World War I, would arrive less than 20 years later. Modern historians have argued long and hard over the degree to which the Versailles Treaty sowed the seeds of World War II. In a Mini-Q it is not possible to explore the fullness of this argument. However, it is possible to look at several of the terms of the Treaty and consider how they might have been factors in the war to come. Examine the four documents that follow and answer the question, *How did the Versailles Treaty help cause World War II?*