

Major Provisions of the Treaty of Versailles

The Punishment of Germany

- Germany was required to admit total blame for starting World War I.
Germany was required to pay for the total cost of World War I, including homes and factories destroyed; ammunition; uniforms; and pensions for Allied soldiers. Allied leaders could not agree on a total amount or a timeline for payment. When the treaty was signed, estimates for reparations (repayment for war damages) were as high as \$300 billion.
- Germany's armies were limited in size, and the German naval fleet was turned over to the Allies.
- Germany's colonial possessions were divided among the Allies. France gained control of the German border region of Alsace-Lorraine, mining rights in the Saar, occupation rights in the Rhineland for 15 years, and supervisory control over some German territories in the Middle East. Britain was granted a mandate—control but not possession—over some German-controlled territory in the Middle East. Italy gained control over the southern Tyrol, a region in the Alps inhabited by 200,000 Germans. Japan was granted a mandate over German colonies in the Pacific and Asia, including China's Shandong province.

Other Territorial Changes

- Austria-Hungary, Germany's chief ally in World War I, was divided into four independent nations: Austria, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia.
- Five other independent nations were established along Germany's border with the Soviet Union to prevent the spread of communism: Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

An International Organization Established

- Two international peacekeeping bodies were established by the treaty: the League of Nations and the World Court. League member countries were obligated to assist one another in stopping international aggression. The World Court was set up to mediate disputes between countries.

Issues Not Covered by the Treaty of Versailles

- Wilson wanted open negotiations and the elimination of secret treaties. The Treaty of Versailles was mostly negotiated behind closed doors by representatives of four nations: the United States, Great Britain, France, and Italy.
- There is no mention of the rights of neutrals at sea or freedom of the seas in the treaty. Free trade was largely ignored by the treaty. Tariffs were left intact. The exception was German colonies, in which free trade was required.
- No country besides Germany was required to reduce the size of its armies or armaments.

The U.S. Rejection of the Treaty of Versailles

At the close of the Paris Peace Conference that ended World War I, President Woodrow Wilson focused on the charter for the League of Nations. Although he believed the final Treaty of Versailles was flawed and harsher toward Germany than he would have liked, he was certain the League of Nations would ultimately help moderate the treaty's harshness and discourage acts of aggression. Thus, when Wilson headed home in July 1919, he was euphoric and ready to face the greatest challenge of his career: to win U.S. ratification of the Treaty of Versailles.

Most Americans approved of the main provisions of the Treaty of Versailles. However, many questioned the part on which Wilson had set his heart: the Covenant establishing the League of Nations. The Covenant called for strong efforts to prevent future wars and provided for collective action against states that went to war in violation of the treaty. In addition, Article 10 of the treaty guaranteed the political independence of League of Nations member states and their protection against external aggression. These provisions, especially Article 10, prompted great concern among Americans about whether joining the League would entail participation in foreign wars without the approval of Congress.

Wilson, a Democrat, met with opposition in the Senate, where the treaty was vigorously debated in March 1919. Republicans had won control of Congress in 1918, and the Senate majority leader was Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, a bitter personal rival of Wilson's. Many felt Wilson had made an irreversible mistake by not having taken a Republican with him to Versailles in the first place. Now, a group of 16 die-hard isolationists, mostly Republicans, opposed the treaty as long as it contained the Covenant. Dubbed the "Irreconcilables"—because they were determined to defeat any treaty—they signed a petition stating that the League would not adequately protect American interests. Other critics, like Senator Lodge and Senator William E. Borah of Idaho, claimed the treaty would limit U.S. freedom in foreign policy, curtail its expansion, and interfere with domestic issues. In a speech outlining why the Senate should reject the League, Lodge concluded, "We would not have our country's vigor exhausted, or her moral force abated, by everlasting meddling and muddling in every quarrel, great and small, which afflicts the world." Despite such opposition, Wilson could count on the support of 43 of the Senate's 47 Democrats, and he was sure the majority of Republicans would vote for the treaty with certain reservations. The president's challenge was to secure a two-thirds majority vote in support of the treaty.

After a prolonged series of hearings on the treaty, compromise seemed possible in August. Seven leading Republicans offered their support as long as some reservations were attached to the articles of ratification. At first, Wilson was inclined to accept their reservations, but then changed his mind. Wilson made it clear that he did not want to modify Article 10 in any way. He believed it was the heart of the League and that the League was the heart of the whole treaty. Therefore, instead of accepting changes to the treaty, Wilson decided to appeal directly to the American people to win unqualified support for the League.

The president set off on a speaking tour of the country in early September 1919. Wilson traveled 8,000 miles, visiting 29 cities and delivering 40 speeches in just 22 days. The tour began well. In city after city, he explained the treaty, making his case for the importance of the League. In one speech, he exclaimed, “if we do not go in [to the League], my fellow citizens, think of the tragedy of that result—the only sufficient guaranty to the peace of the world withheld!” As the tour progressed, Wilson’s health deteriorated, and his speeches were less lucid. During his speech in Pueblo, Colorado, on September 19, he broke down. Wilson’s doctor convinced him to cut the trip short and return to Washington. A few days later, he suffered a massive stroke and was paralyzed on the left side. For nearly eight months, Wilson was incapacitated and could not even meet with his cabinet. Edith Wilson, his wife, took messages back and forth to the president.

Wilson’s appeal to the American public had failed to turn the tide in the Senate. Then, shortly before the election of 1920, Wilson damaged all hope of having the treaty ratified. Senator Lodge, head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, presented a resolution of consent to ratification along with 11 reservations to the League. The reservation to Article 10 said that the United States assumed no obligation to go to war unless Congress explicitly approved of such action. Wilson, however, maintained that any reservation to Article 10 was a rejection of the moral commitments he had made in Paris.

Rather than salvage the possibility of U.S. membership in the League, Wilson became even more uncompromising. Some scholars attribute Wilson’s increasing combativeness and extremism to the mental impairment caused by his stroke. He argued that the United States could save the League only if they went into it without any reservations. Further, he claimed he would refuse to put the treaty into effect if the Senate approved it with reservations to Article 10.

Fearing the treaty would never be ratified without reservations, Wilson declared that the election of 1920 would be a national referendum on the League of Nations. When Warren G. Harding, a Republican and an opponent of the League, was resoundingly voted into office, U.S. entry into the League was officially doomed. In March 1920 a final attempt in the Senate to win approval for the treaty again fell short of the necessary votes. Unwilling to compromise, Wilson had destroyed his own dream. The United States never joined the League, and Wilson remained sad that Americans had chosen a “barren independence” over membership in the international body.

The United States ultimately signed a separate treaty with Germany during the Harding administration.