

## The What-If War and the Treaty of Versailles

It is popular today to adopt a revisionist view of the Treaty, to believe that the Versailles Treaty was not oppressive.

I want to suggest that had things gone just a little differently, there would not have been 50 million to over 80 million dead in World War II.

Let's explore.

Both sides indulged in hysterical and false atrocity propaganda suggesting that they fighting an enemy who would destroy civilisation as we know it and was ready to suggest that they were committing the most atrocious brutalities.

That, and the huge death rate, made offers of peace made repeatedly by the Pope, Woodrow Wilson and even a half hearted one by the Germans in 1917 very difficult to accept. However, by early 1918, domestic unrest everywhere made the Entente partners receptive, at last, to a peace treaty.

Clemenceau would have had to be dragged screaming to the peace table but by 1918 Americans and the British Empire had the most troops on the Western Front. 250,000 American soldiers a month were arriving on the Western Front. Eventually, there would be 4.8 million of them.

The German submarine campaign had failed. The Bulgarians, Turks and Austro-Hungarians in the Balkans were collapsing. Britain offered a peace treaty to Germany provided Germany withdrew from Belgium. Now was the time to accept. Woodrow Wilson had offered peace on his 14 points – an honourable peace.

Russia had had the Bolshevik Revolution and was in no position to fight on.

There was no peace. Instead, Ludendorff offered the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk to the Russians. By it, the Russians had to give up 1/3 of its best land – Courland, Poland, Ukraine, Livonia (Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia) and the Southern Caucasus, 90% of its coal bearing lands, and more than 50% of its industries. Russia also agreed to pay massive reparations to the Germans. Lenin eventually ordered the Bolshevik representatives to sign the treaty in March 1918 whatever it said. One representative even signed it unread. Lenin believed in imminent Bolshevik revolutions across Europe. These would mean that the Treaty would then be a dead letter.

It was a dead letter for a different reason and had two very awkward outcomes – for the Germans. It demonstrated without false propaganda just what a danger the Germans were for Europe. Clemenceau's demand that the Germans be crushed was given new impetus. The new territories also cost Germany dozens of divisions (1 million soldiers) to police. These new territories gave no real benefit to starving Germans but cost it heavily when they were needed on the Western Front for the Michael offensive.

So there is the first **what if**. A more congenial and less crushing Treaty of Brest-Litovsk could have freed enough troops on the Western Front to finish the War. With these troops capable of exerting great pressure, this pressure would have led the Entente offering a real peace treaty.

Had German behaved with more circumspection with the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Clemenceau's demands that Germany be crushed could have been ignored by the British and Americans and the peace treaty offered by the Germans or the Pope could have been accepted.

As it was, dozens of divisions freed from Russia were moved to the Western Front. An offensive of 40 Sturm divisions were prepared and trained over the next few months. The Michael Offensive was launched on 21 March 1918. But to what end? Ludendorff's words 'make a hole in the Entente's lines and all will follow from there' did not work. The Offensive went nowhere strategically. Eventually the attacks were stopped at Villers Bretonneux. A minor what-if occurs there. Had Ludendorff had an actual strategic goal for the Michael Offensive, then the overwhelming force of that offensive might have achieved something.

With the exhaustion of the Michael Offensive, the 100 days counter-offensive by the Entente began.

By October 1918, the Germans were in last extremities of capacity. Ludendorff forced Wilhelm to appoint Liberal and Catholic members of the Reichstag to the Cabinet. Ludendorff, seeing the end coming, wanted these groups to share some of the blame for the War.

Prince Maximilian of Baden was appointed as Premier. He gained the removal of Ludendorff. To the Conservatives and Junkers, this was a great and hated step towards liberalisation. To the Allies, including America, his appointment was just more of the same and was perceived as just another Hohenzollern Prince in power. It was very different but not perceived that way. Had a different man been appointed from the Liberals, the Allies might have been prepared to consider a peace offer subject to the repudiation of Brest-Litovsk and German withdrawal from Belgium.

When the German government asked U.S. Pres. Woodrow Wilson to arrange a general armistice in October 1918, it declared that it accepted the Fourteen Points he had formulated and delivered to Congress in January as the basis for a just peace. However, the Allies demanded "compensation by Germany for all damage done to the civilian population of the Allies and their property by the aggression of Germany by land, by sea and from the air." Further, the nine points covering new territorial consignments were complicated by the secret treaties that England, France, and Italy had made with Greece, Romania, and each other during the last years of the war.

This was the third **what if**.

By the beginning of November 1918, the Germans could fight no longer. German reinforcements were spat at and called 'scabs' when going up to the line. The German people were starving. The average calorie intake had fallen to 1200 calories, borderline starvation. Revolution was only days away. The Bolsheviks had already taken power in Munich, forming the Bavarian Bolshevik Republic.

The Germans sought an urgent armistice now offering a withdrawal from Belgium. Ludendorff raved on about undertaking a massive suicidal attack a 'Soldier's Honour'. He was ignored. The Grand Admiral did not take the point. He proposed a massed naval attack on the British fleet. The Fleet mutinied. This time, this would lead to a German Bolshevik Revolution. Austria already was enduring a struggle ending in a Bolshevik Revolution.

Wilson said that the Germans must negotiate an armistice with the Allied Generals. No 14 points offered now.

So the German army, in undisturbed possession of hundred of square miles of foreign territory and with an ongoing propaganda campaign saying that total victory was just around the very next corner, suddenly announced that it was beaten and obtained a ceasefire pending a treaty.

To the Germans, this could only mean that the army had been betrayed. And who would betray the nation but the Liberals and Catholics recently brought into the Cabinet? The myth of the Dolchstoßlegende or The Stab in the Back or The Versailles Diktat was born.

All those signing the Versailles Treaty were assassinated by right wing assassins. They were seen as traitors to Germany.

Had the Allies decided to fight on until German unconditional surrender as occurred in World War II, the rise of the right wing and the Nazi party would not have happened. The German army would have been crushed and probably the Bolsheviks would have risen temporarily to power as they did. The casualties would have been heavy. The Allies were suffering 140,000 casualties a month in 1918. The German casualty rate was even higher. The Americans could absorb the losses.

If the Allies had sought unconditional surrender, it might have taken another 400,000 Allied casualties and another 3 months for this to happen. Is that worth saving 50 million to over 80 million dead in the next War?

This is the third and biggest **what-if**.

If that had happened there would most probably not have been a Second World War; no execution of Jews and other undesirables; no guilt giving rise to the state of Israel; no Israeli wars; no call for *Lebensraum*; no invasion of the East and Russia.

In the Pacific and China, this would have meant that the Japanese would not have been permitted to expand without check as they did. Everybody had their eye off the ball in the thirties.

Still the depression and Mussolini would have occurred. He arose because of what Italy did not get at Versailles. The depression was an outcome of the costs of the Great War. Someone had to pay for it and the European and Australian population was the target. One third of all workers unemployed in Australia. US and Germany similar. US Dollars for German girls to dance naked. Fritz's table.

The League of Nations would have still failed. US isolationism saw to that. Wilson was the proponent of the Lea Dolchstoßlegende but his own Congress and Senate would not ratify it. The United Nations would not have got started. It was the outcome of the Second World War. Dolchstoßlegende

Perhaps the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia would have failed. If the Allies got really involved in the Russian Civil War, it would have changed the outcome. However, now we are getting to the edge of the possible.

## **The Treaty of Versailles**

So how bad was the Treaty?

First, the Russians were excluded as an outlaw nation. Germany was too. Its representatives kept behind barbed wire. They only got to see the final form of the treaty. 'Sign it with no alterations or we go back to war' Because Wilhelm had abdicated and Ludendorff had resigned, the

representatives of Germany were from the new Weimar Republic. The Weimar Republic never recovered from its members signing the Treaty.

The war between the Great Powers had ceased with the Armistice but now there were a rash of nasty little wars going on. The blockade of Germany continued on after the Armistice. 250,000 Germans, mainly children, starved to death in next eight months that the Peace Conference proceeded and the 58 subcommittees pondered and reported.

Clemenceau wanted Germany broken up and crushed so it could never rise again. This did not happen. Clemenceau and his colleagues hoped at the very least to have Allied troops occupy bridges over the Rhine and proposed a plan to create a buffer state in the Rhineland in order to create a barrier between a revitalized Germany and France. However, their demands would not be met by the treaty. Instead, France obtained the demilitarization of the Rhineland, a mandate over the Saar and promises of Anglo-American support in case of a new German aggression (a commitment that could not be relied on after the United States failed to ratify the treaty). Clemenceau's inability to procure the Rhineland state led to fierce criticism of him in France and contributed to his subsequent fall from power.

After repeated defaults, the French occupied the Ruhr from 1923 to 1925. The Germans began passive resistance. The German currency collapsed. The Germans once more agreed to pay reparations under various plans but failed each time until Germany refused to pay any more in 1932.

Lloyd George wanted Belgian independence reasserted and somebody to pay for the debts run up in the US. He had hoped Dolchstosslegende that the US would forgive the debts. This did not happen. Germany accepted total responsibility for the war and agreed to pay reparations of \$5 billion in gold, ships, commodities, securities or other forms of valuable items. These payments would not be made. Instead, the Great War meant that power in the world passed from Britain and its Empire to the United States. Britain did not acknowledge this and until 1956 still thought of herself as an empire and imperial power. Dolchstosslegende

Under the Treaty the Rhineland and the industrial and coal rich Saarland were to be occupied by troops for fifteen years. France hoped that Germany would renege so that France could incorporate these into France. They did renege so France occupied the Ruhr valley but the plan to force German reparations founded on British opposition.

Wilson, received at first in Europe as a hero because of his 14 points – transparent treaties transparently negotiated, independence for peoples, free trade, League of Nations, etc lost interest.

1. Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.
2. Absolute freedom of navigation upon the seas, outside territorial waters, alike in peace and in war, except as the seas may be closed in whole or in part by international action for the enforcement of international covenants.
3. The removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all the nations consenting to the peace and associating themselves for its maintenance.

4. Adequate guarantees given and taken that national armaments will be reduced to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety.
5. A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.
6. The evacuation of all Russian territory and such a settlement of all questions affecting Russia as will secure the best and freest coöperation of the other nations of the world in obtaining for her an unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development and national policy and assure her of a sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing; and, more than a welcome, assistance also of every kind that she may need and may herself desire. The treatment accorded Russia by her sister nations in the months to come will be the acid test of their good will, of their comprehension of her needs as distinguished from their own interests, and of their intelligent and unselfish sympathy.
7. Belgium, the whole world will agree, must be evacuated and restored, without any attempt to limit the sovereignty which she enjoys in common with all other free nations. No other single act will serve as this will serve to restore confidence among the nations in the laws which they have themselves set and determined for the government of their relations with one another. Without this healing act the whole structure and validity of international law is forever impaired.
8. All French territory should be freed and the invaded portions restored, and the wrong done to France by Prussia in 1871 in the matter of Alsace-Lorraine, which has unsettled the peace of the world for nearly fifty years, should be righted, in order that peace may once more be made secure in the interest of all.
9. A readjustment of the frontiers of Italy should be effected along clearly recognizable lines of nationality.
10. The peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity of autonomous development.
11. Rumania, Serbia, and Montenegro should be evacuated; occupied territories restored; Serbia accorded free and secure access to the sea; and the relations of the several Balkan states to one another determined by friendly counsel along historically established lines of allegiance and nationality; and international guarantees of the political and economic independence and territorial integrity of the several Balkan states should be entered into.
12. The Turkish portions of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development, and the Dardanelles should be permanently opened as a free passage to the ships and commerce of all nations under international guarantees.
13. An independent Polish state should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and

whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant.

14. A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.

70 delegates from 27 nations participated in negotiations in Paris but the Council of Ten (two delegates each from Britain, France, America, Italy and Japan) acted as executive and negotiated secretly. Italy got more than it had negotiated as part of its joining the Entente. However, it wanted still more and so walked out. Japan wanted a statement of racial equality. America and Australia strenuously resisted this idea. Japan walked out.

The delegates wanted Wilhelm II put on trial as a war criminal. However, the Dutch queen in whose country he had sought sanctuary refused any extradition. Ludendorff had fled to Sweden.

The big four remaining made the running in the negotiations.

Lawrence appeared with Arabs but Britain took Iraq and France got Lebanon and Syria as arranged by Sykes-Picot agreement. Arabs got Transjordan. Ho Chi Minh sought the negotiating parties to free Vietnam from French colonial occupation. He got no reply.

The Greeks and Turks quarrelled over Ionia and fought a nasty war outlined in the *Water Diviner*. The Conference forced Turkey to give Greece Smyrna. In 1922 under Kemal Ataturk, the Turks swept down on Smyrna and gave the Greeks 48 hours to leave the city. Those found there afterwards would be shot. The docks were packed but many could not get out of the city to safety. The Smyrna atrocities have poisoned Greek – Turkish relations ever since.

Korea petitioned the Conference for independence from the savage colonisation of Japan. They were ignored. The Jews petitioned the Conference for recognition of Palestine as a Jewish homeland. They were ignored. The three Caucasian Republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were recognised but independence for Ukraine was ignored. Poland was resurrected for perhaps the fourth time depending on how one counts.

Germany lost Alsace-Lorraine, Czechoslovakia and overwhelmingly German Upper Silesia, Schleswig-Holstein and Sudetenland. Also was lost Eastern Pomerania and Danzig, part of Junker East Prussia. Silesia and Pomerania were considered German heartlands.

Austria, now a sole Republic, was forbidden to unite Germany without League of Nations' approval.

All of the above decisions by the Conference led to trouble or war later on.

Germany lost all its overseas territories. Australia gained Papua, New Zealand gained German Samoa. All Pacific territories north of the Equator went to Japan. Shandong province of China went to Japan. Togoland and Cameroon went to France. German East Africa went to Portugal.

The Reichswehr was reduced to 100,000 men. The whole army's structure was laid out in detail to make it incapable of offensive operations. Even machine guns were drastically limited. The General Staff was abolished. Paramilitary forces were forbidden as were all but a tiny navy. The rest of her navy was scuttled by the British off the mouth of Scapa Flow. No airforce or tanks were permitted. All planes and heavy guns bigger than 105mm were to be destroyed.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was abrogated completely. When the Germans complained of the harshness of the Versailles Treaty, the Allies pointed out that it was more generous than the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

The Treaty of Versailles began in Paris on 28 January 1919 and was signed in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles on 28 June 1919. That was five years to the day after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. Since 1914, empires, kingdoms and government had fallen. La Belle Epoque was over.

The most important **what-if** is had Germany been crushed utterly so that she could not rise again, the Second World War would not have happened with its horrendous death toll. If Germany had been treated as Clemenceau wanted, the Dolchstoßlegende would not have mattered. Germany would have been too weak to be of any danger.

However, this did not happen. Instead, Germany was stripped of territory that had been part of Germany for centuries, forced to pay reparations and had her army, airforce and navy crushed, all the while believing that she had been betrayed. Had not her armies won in the field? It was certain that she would seek to circumvent the Treaty and rise up again to avenge herself.

Then came Hyperinflation in 1923 when workers were paid twice a day so that their wages would not totally erode in value by day's end.

Then came the Depression that hit Germany and Australia equally hard.

And all the while people in Germany watched the war speculators and currency manipulators flaunt their riches.

Hitler was a populist that appealed to the downtrodden and the aggrieved who had seen their lives and comforts destroyed.

Once the Treaty of Versailles was signed, the Second World War and its battles would have to be fought. No compromise was possible. However, the Great War was a 'what if war'. If certain things, minor changes, had happened before the armistice in 1918, there would not have been a Second World War.

## **Bibliography of the What-if War and the Treaty of Versailles**

### *John Maynard Keynes – **The Economic Consequences of the Peace***

This is the book to read about the Versailles Peace Conference. He published the book in 1919 just six months after leaving the Conference. He presents damning portraits of the main players and of the chaos and confusion that reigned throughout the Conference as the parties lurched toward and failed to obtain a ‘Carthaginian peace’ that would crush Germany as thoroughly as Rome had once crushed Carthage. This book is now free to download in various formats, including Kindle, from Project Gutenberg.

### *G.J. Meyer – **A World Undone – The Story of the Great War***

This presents the clearest picture of the machinations of Germany to end the war in the last weeks. It also provides a sobering recital of the human costs of the Allied 100 Days Offensive.

### *Leon Trotsky - **The History of the Russian Revolution to Brest-Litovsk***

Although somewhat dry, it presents a detailed background of the negotiations to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk that paradoxically led to the German loss of the Great War. This can readily be found online.

### ***The Treaty of Versailles***

There is a version of the full Treaty in English to be found in the Library of Congress, online at <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ust000002-0043.pdf>. It is worth reading so that you can assess, for yourself, how harsh it really was for the German nation. In the Treaty, the League of Nations was also created. Its aims and objectives are surprisingly idealistic. More oddly, the American Congress refused to ratify it on the ground that it impugned the sovereignty of the United States. This argument is still put by Americans for their refusal to join the International Criminal Court and to justify their desire to leave the United Nations.