

The German reaction to the Treaty of Versailles

Throughout the war, the people of Germany had been told that they were winning. Therefore, when they were told that not only had they lost, but they had also been punished so severely by the Treaty of Versailles, they were both shocked and angry. What did the terms of the Treaty mean for ordinary people in Germany?

Objectives

- Recall why Germans hoped to be treated fairly after the First World War.
- Explain the political situation in Germany at the end of the war.
- Evaluate the impact of the Treaty of Versailles on Germany.

The German people hoped that the Treaty of Versailles would be fair to them and try to guarantee future peace. A British blockade had prevented food being imported to Germany throughout the war and people were starving – the Germans needed compassion and help to rebuild a country that lay in tatters.

The Allies had blamed the German Kaiser (king) for the start of the war and said that he needed to **abdicate** before the armistice could be signed. When the Kaiser had fled to Holland, many Germans felt that the person responsible had been punished, so no further punishment was needed.

The German people were shocked by the severity of the Treaty. Germany had not even been allowed to negotiate the terms of the Treaty and people felt that this Diktat (forced treaty) was neither fair nor justified. Many wanted to reject the Treaty, but they knew that the alternative was to start fighting again and nobody wanted that. The German government knew that they had no choice but to agree to the Treaty of Versailles, but they were promptly hated by the population when

▼ **SOURCE A** People all over Germany protested about the Treaty of Versailles; this is a protest in Kiel in 1919



they signed it. The government became known as the 'November Criminals' and it was said that Germany had been 'stabbed in the back'.

Politics in Germany

The abdication of the German Kaiser left no one to run the country. A new, democratic government known as

the **Weimar Republic** was set up, but some people said that it was not strong enough to run the country. They wanted one, strong leader. Others felt that the new government wasn't helping people fast enough. Many revolts broke out and the first five years after the war were unstable and violent.

▼ **SOURCE B** The words of Count Brockdorff-Rantzau, one of the German politicians who was present when the Treaty of Versailles was signed, from May 1919:

Those who sign this treaty, will sign the death sentence of many millions of German men, women and children.

Hatred for the Treaty of Versailles

The part of the treaty that many Germans hated the most was Article 231, the war guilt clause. Germany and its allies had to accept full responsibility for starting the war and pay reparations. The German economy was in ruins. The German government claimed that 763,000 civilians had died of starvation.

Germany had to give up the rich coal fields of the Saar and their overseas colonies. The Germans lost 16 per cent of their coal and 48 per cent of their steel. Germany also lost 13 per cent of its land. Nearly six million German nationals now found themselves living in different countries, often under the control of governments who resented Germany.

Germany was also humiliated by the loss of their army – a huge source of national pride before and during the war. In the terms of the Treaty of Versailles it was to be limited to just 100,000 men. Germany felt vulnerable and alone in a ring of hostility. Many felt that France could attack at any stage and in the east a new threat was emerging. A Communist government was now in control in Russia and no one knew how much of a threat this new system of government would be.

Key Words

abdicate Weimar Republic
Weimar constitution democratic
hyperinflation Nazi

Fact

In 1929 it was worked out that it would take until 1988 for the Germans to pay back the reparations. In fact the final payment was made on 3 October 2010. In total Germany paid £59 million.

Work

- 1 Why were there protests all over Germany when the Treaty of Versailles was signed?
- 2 Why was the German government known as the 'November Criminals'?
- 3 How did Germany's government change after the Treaty was signed? Why was it unpopular?

Practice Question

Write an account of how the Treaty of Versailles caused problems for Germany.

8 marks

Study Tip

Plan your answer carefully: make sure you explain the problems in chronological order and explain why each problem arose, what happened and what the consequences were.

Timeline

1918

October Revolts in Germany; people protest about the war and food shortages
11 November The armistice is signed; Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicates

1919

4–15 January Communists attempt but fail to overthrow the German government
28 June The Treaty of Versailles is signed
11 August The German Revolution ends and the **Weimar Constitution**, a list of rules that the new **democratic** government must follow, is accepted

1920

March The Kapp Putsch (revolt) against the German government is only narrowly defeated

1921

April The League of Nations agrees that Germany should pay £6,600 million in reparations



1923

January Germany misses a reparations payment; the French invade the Ruhr, a German industrial area – they plan to seize German goods instead of the money they are owed; the German government pays workers to strike so that there are no goods for the French to take and prints more bank notes to pay the strikers; the German economy crumbles
November Because of **hyperinflation**, a loaf of bread costs 200,000 million marks; the **Nazi** Party, led by Adolf Hitler, tries but fails to overthrow the government in the Munich Putsch

1924

August The Dawes Plan; America lends Germany 800 million gold marks to help them rebuild their economy

