

# How Did the Versailles Treaty Help Cause World War II?

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Daniel Fitzpatrick, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 19, 1930.

**Overview:** On June 28, 1919 – seven and a half months after the horrific fighting of World War I ended in November 1918 – the Versailles Treaty was signed by the victorious Allied nations of Great Britain, France, and the United States and by a defeated Germany. The framers of the treaty hoped that it would stabilize Europe and ensure that another catastrophic war would never happen again. But just over two decades later, the flames of war consumed Europe. This Mini-Q examines the ways in which the treaty contributed to the Second World War.

## The Documents:

- Document A: German Territorial Losses; *Mein Kampf* (map and text)
- Document B: Treaty of Versailles, Article 160; Troop Levels, 1920 (cartoon)
- Document C: Treaty of Versailles, Articles 232 and 233; Reparations (chart)
- Document D: Treaty of Versailles, Article 231; War Guilt Clause

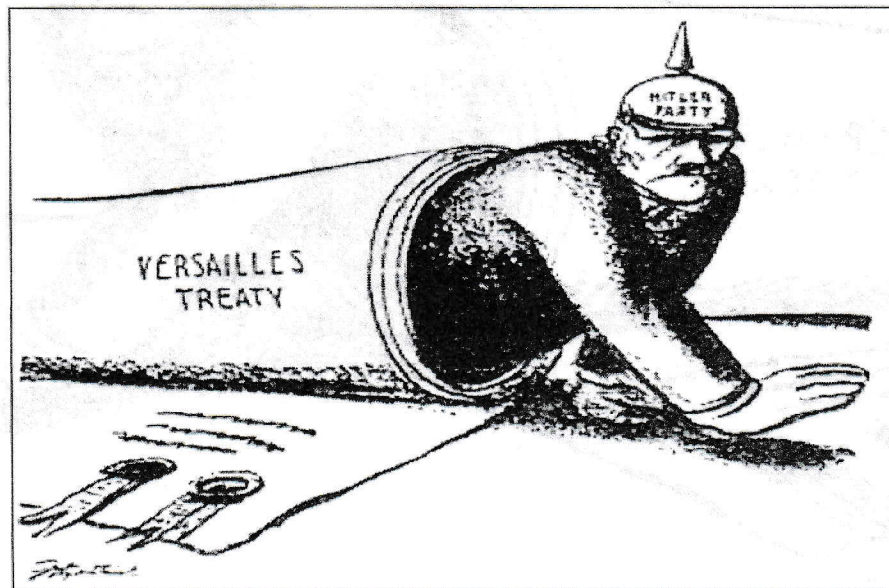
## A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

## Hook Exercise: Analyzing a Political Cartoon

**Directions:** From August 1914 to November 1918 the major powers of Europe were at war. The war pitted Germany and Austria-Hungary against France, England, Russia, and, eventually, the United States. Known then as the Great War, and known today as World War I, this terrible conflict left an estimated 17 million soldiers and civilians dead. It finally ended with a German defeat. After the war a conference was held at the Versailles Palace just outside of Paris. The purpose was to write a treaty that would set the terms of the peace. The treaty was finally signed on June 28, 1919.

Below is a famous political cartoon. With a partner, examine the cartoon and answer the questions that follow.

**Source:** Daniel Fitzpatrick, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 19, 1930.



### Hook Exercise Questions:

1. During what years was World War I fought? When was the Versailles Treaty signed?
2. When and in what American newspaper did the cartoon appear?
3. How many years after the signing of the Versailles Treaty was this cartoon published? How many years before the outbreak of WWII?
4. Based on what he is wearing on his head, who does the person in the cartoon represent?
5. What is the person crawling out of?
6. What is the main idea of the cartoon?
7. What information would you like to have to decide if the main idea of the cartoon is correct?

## How Did the Versailles Treaty Help Cause World War II?

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?*

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## Background Essay Questions

1. What were the years of World War I?
2. What were the military and civilian death totals in World War I?
3. What were the four main causes of World War I?
4. Why were the German people not prepared to accept the harsh peace terms of the Versailles Treaty?
5. Who were the three government leaders that shaped the Versailles Treaty and what country did each represent?
6. What was Germany's role at the Versailles conference?
7. How did the goals of Georges Clemenceau and Woodrow Wilson differ?
8. What was the concern of English treaty representative George Maynard Keynes?
9. Define these terms:
  - mustard gas
  - combatants
  - carnage
  - Western Front
  - Eastern Front
  - League of Nations

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### Timeline

- 1914** – July 28: Austro-Hungarian emperor Franz Joseph declares war on Serbia.
- 1916** – Battle of Verdun. German and French armies suffer one million casualties.
- 1917** – April: United States declares war on Germany.
- 1917** – October–November: Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Communist rule soon begins.
- 1919** – June 28: Treaty of Versailles is signed by delegates of Germany and Allied Powers. WWI is over.
- 1932** – Unemployment rate in Germany reaches 30%.
- 1933** – January 30: Adolf Hitler is named Chancellor of Germany.
- 1939** – September 1: Germany invades Poland, marking the beginning of WWII.

## Document A

Source: Map created from various sources.

### German Territorial Losses, Versailles Treaty, 1919.



**Note:** The Treaty took Alsace and Lorraine away from Germany, reducing German coal production by 40%.

Source: Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 1924.

It should scarcely seem questionable to anyone that ... the restoration of the frontiers of 1914 could be achieved only by blood. Only childish and naive minds can lull themselves in the idea that they can bring about a correction of Versailles by wheedling and begging.... No nation can remove this hand from its throat except by the sword.

**Note:** Adolf Hitler published *Mein Kampf* ("My Struggle") in 1924, well before he came to power but when he was beginning to make his mark as a German political figure.

### Document Analysis

1. What territories did Germany lose due to the Versailles Treaty?
2. East Prussia remained a part of Germany. Why might the loss of the Polish Corridor and Danzig have been especially difficult for Germans?
3. In losing territory, what critical resource did Germany give up?
4. How does Hitler suggest Germans should respond to the Versailles Treaty?
5. How can you use this document to explain how the Versailles Treaty helped cause World War II?