The Treaty of Versailles:
The Major Cause of World War II

Ashley Grimshaw
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Outline

Thesis: The Treaty of Versailles was the major cause of World War II.

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World War I was a major shock for the world. It left much of Europe devastated, in debt, and the victors looking for revenge. That was the victors’ downfall at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. While the delegates of the Allies making the treaty should have been worried about the future of Europe, they allowed themselves to become preoccupied with worries about borders, power, and making Germany, as weak as possible.¹ The Treaty of Versailles, signed on June 28, 1919, was supposed to create peace, but in the end all it created was another disaster.² The treaty forced Germany to lose territory, caused serious economic problems which were only worsened by the depression of the 1930s, left thousands of Germans outside of Germany, and all of these things created German resentment towards the Western world. The effects of the Treaty of Versailles weakened Germany’s government and that, along with all of the effects, allowed for the rise of fascism and Hitler in Germany after World War I. All of these factors added up to the beginning of World War II and they were all caused by the Treaty of Versailles. The Treaty of Versailles was the major cause of World War II.

The stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles were specifically aimed at making Germany as weak as possible. Certain parts of the treaty took away German territory and distributed it to other countries or the territory was used to form new countries. Areas like the Saar Basin and Upper Silesia, which were important to the German economy, were given to France and Poland, respectively.³ Poland also received Danzig.⁴ Other territories that were ceded included Alsace-Lorraine to France, Eupen-Malmedy to Belgium, North Schleswig to Denmark, and West Prussia, which became known as the Polish Corridor, to Poland.⁵ All of Germany’s overseas
colonies were ceded to the Allies as well. The Treaty of Versailles also created the smaller nation of Austria in place of what had been Austria-Hungary before the war and the new nation of Czechoslovakia from German land. The Treaty of Versailles weakened Germany’s means of transportation. It put Germany’s river system under foreign control. Along with Poland getting the area of Danzig, the Treaty of Versailles gave it control of the railroads and free use of the port there. The Treaty of Versailles also ordered that all of the ships in Germany’s mercantile marine were to be given to the Allies and ordered that Germany must build ships for the Allies in the years to come. In addition the treaty put restrictions on Germany’s military. Germany was allowed an army of one hundred thousand and a navy of fifteen thousand. Under the treaty Germany wasn’t allowed an air force, armored cars, tanks, heavy guns, submarines, or dirigibles. The treaty also forbade the import of war materials into Germany. Furthermore the Rhineland was demilitarized. Finally, the Treaty of Versailles laid Germany solely responsible for World War I and ordered that Germany pay the entire cost of it through an undefined amount of reparations in an article that read: “The Allied and Associated Governments however, require, and the German Government undertakes that to the extent of her utmost capacity, she will make compensation for all damage done to the civilian population of the Allied or Associated Powers and to their property by her aggression by land, by sea, and from the air.” The treaty also stipulated that the reparations could be made through transferable wealth, like gold and ships, from the value of property in the ceded territories, and through annual payments of cash and materials. While the Treaty of Versailles was successful in making Germany weak, its terms would later lead to World War II.
Although the Allied delegates thought they had successfully ended the World War I and had prevented the German threat with the Treaty of Versailles, they were wrong. The treaty that they had created was a weak one. Many political figures recognized this and predicted the horrible results to come. Marshal Ferdinand Foch, a French General who had been involved in World War I, said of the treaty, “This is not peace. It is an armistice for twenty years.” A South African statesman named Jan Christian Smuts wrote to British Prime Minister David Lloyd George: “This treaty breathes a poisonous spirit of revenge, which may yet scorch the fair face – not of a corner of France, but of Europe.” Alfred Lord Milner, the British Colonial Secretary called the Treaty of Versailles “the peace to end peace.” All of these men correctly described the Treaty of Versailles, but they would not know that until 1939.

While everyone had a reaction to the Treaty of Versailles, no reaction could be compared to that of the German people. Upon the printing of the treaty’s terms in German newspapers the Germans were outraged. They viewed the treaty as vicious and unjust. These feelings stemmed not only from the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles, but from the fact that the German people had believed that the treaty would be along the lines of President Wilson’s Fourteen Points, which called for much fairer treatment of Germany. The treaty that they read, the Treaty of Versailles, was vastly different from Wilson’s Fourteen Points. German outrage was also geared toward their government because they were appalled by the government’s acceptance of such a treaty. This feeling of outrage would later turn to a feeling of resentment of the Europeans that made the treaty and of the government that accepted it. The German peoples’ resentment would not go away as they blamed all their economic difficulties on the
The Treaty of Versailles and viewed themselves as a country surrounded by vengeful enemies. The Treaty of Versailles caused German resentment that Hitler capitalized on to gain support and that led to the beginning to World War II.

The Treaty of Versailles had a crippling effect on the German economy. Before World War I the German economy had been dependent on three things: overseas commerce and trade, iron and coal, and its transport and tariff system. The treaty’s provisions harmed each of these in some way. The loss of Germany’s overseas colonies, mercantile marine, and transport systems to other nations, previously mentioned, obviously affected the economy. Before the war Germany was a very important part of the European trading system. Germany was the largest source of supply to Russia and Italy and the second largest source of supply to Britain and France. The Treaty of Versailles hindered this by taking away Germany’s means of transporting goods to these nations. Without sufficient means of transportation Germany couldn’t export as many goods, harming her economy. Also without transportation Germany had to pay for her trade to be carried to and from other nations. The problem with this was that Germany did not have any spare money due to the reparations imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. The Treaty of Versailles also contained terms that did not allow Germany to charge custom duties on imports, denying Germany another large source of income. So once again its economy was injured.

As mentioned before the German economy was also dependent upon iron and coal, but the Treaty of Versailles managed to harm this part of its economy as well. The loss of Alsace-Lorraine to France meant the loss of ore-fields for Germany, a major loss given that these ore-
fields had contained seventy-five percent of Germany’s iron-ore. The Saar Basin and Upper Silesia, which were ceded to France and Poland respectively in the Treaty of Versailles, contained the majority of Germany’s coal fields. The loss of territory was not the only reason Germany lost its coal resources as a result of the Treaty of Versailles; the Germans were also required by the treaty to deliver millions of tons of coal to France, Belgium, and Italy as part of their reparation payments. The economy of Germany was dependent on coal for its energy needs. Coal was needed to keep locomotives running to transport trade goods, it was needed for the electricity in factories, and it was needed to keep factories running in general. Due to its loss of territory and its reparations from the Treaty of Versailles Germany had an inability to transport the goods and keep open the factories that held up its economy.

The loss of coal was not the only way the territory provisions in the Treaty of Versailles hurt the German economy. The loss of territory also meant a loss of the German industry in these areas, because the industries also fell under control of the countries that received the area, creating the loss of a portion of the German economy. Finally the reparations from the Treaty of Versailles injured the German economy. The reparation total was astronomical, at about forty billion dollars. So for many years after World War I any income for the German economy beyond what was absolutely necessary was stripped from it, making recovery virtually impossible. The Treaty of Versailles was extremely hard on the German economy. It made Germany weak, just as it intended to, but this weakness created by the treaty would only fuel the German desire to become strong once again, yet another reason for the beginning of World War II. And no matter how badly the Treaty of Versailles affected the economy, its affect on the German people due to its affect on the economy was much worse.
The economic problems in Germany caused by the Treaty of Versailles were hard on the German people and got even worse during the depression of the 1930s. The treaty caused unemployment, poverty, and famine.\textsuperscript{39} The Treaty of Versailles not only took away territory away from Germany, it took property away from Germans. In those areas that were ceded to other countries the German owned properties had no security, meaning that German industries and land could be taken from their owners without any compensation.\textsuperscript{40} This angered the German people and it also made them more susceptible in Germany’s injured economy. The reparations part of the Treaty of Versailles caused the collapse of currency and inflation in Germany and with these two events the German people’s savings were wiped out.\textsuperscript{41} Before World War I Germany had become an industrialized nation, and because of that it had become dependent on the importation of raw materials and food.\textsuperscript{42} Because of the Treaty of Versailles Germany was unable to import enough food due to its lack of transportation and money to do so and this led to famine.\textsuperscript{43}

The Treaty of Versailles also led to a vast increase in unemployment in Germany. The loss of its coal resources and Germany’s inability to import an adequate amount of raw materials meant that many industries could not survive and that put many German people out of work.\textsuperscript{44} The loss of the German merchant marine and the decline in trade due to the Treaty of Versailles also contributed to the rise in unemployment. Without the merchant marine and sufficient trade there were no longer jobs for those German people who relied on navigation and trade as a source of income.\textsuperscript{45} During the Depression ten percent of the German population was unemployed.\textsuperscript{46} The Treaty of Versailles not only affected the unemployment rate in Germany it affected the benefits that the German people received. Before World War I unemployed Germans
received generous unemployment insurance, but because of the reparations element of the Treaty of Versailles and the affect that it was having on Germany during the Depression the German government could no longer afford to be so generous. Unemployment insurance for people in Germany during the Depression was reduced ten to twelve percent and the number of people who were able to receive these benefits also decreased. Even those who did have jobs were harmed as the salaries of public workers in Germany were cut four to eight percent. These economic sufferings hit the German people hard and in their minds their economic problems became directly connected with the provisions that had been forced upon them by foreign nations in the Treaty of Versailles. The German people resented the Treaty of Versailles and the people who created it because of the life it had imposed upon them. It would not be long before the German people were tired of their weakness and suffering and began to strive towards world power once again.

Furthermore, the loss of land caused by the Treaty of Versailles was a monumental issue in German minds. Not only did the loss of territory mean a loss of resources and industry for Germany it meant that the German people were no longer one, which was a good thing to the Allies, but an outrage to the German people themselves. With the loss of lands to other nations and the creation of new nations millions of Germans were left outside of Germany as a result of the Treaty of Versailles. In Alsace-Lorraine, which was ceded to France, the majority of the population was German speaking. In the Saar Basin, which was also under French control, less than one hundred people of the six hundred fifty thousand living there were French, the rest were German. The German lands that were given to Austria and Czechoslovakia in the Treaty of Versailles left seven million and three million Germans in these nations respectively. In the
years after the Treaty of Versailles was signed Germany never truly accepted its loss of territory. Eventually this unhealed wound would motivate the German desire to completely reunite its land and people, another cause of World War II. This desire was displayed perfectly in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* when he wrote: “The reunion of these two German states [Germany and Austria] is our life task, to be carried out by every means at our disposal. Common blood belongs to a common Reich.” This was a warning as to what was to come as a result of the Treaty of Versailles.

The Treaty of Versailles also caused problems in Germany in respect to the democratic government, the Weimar Republic. The German people accepted the Weimar Republic after World War I because they thought it would encourage the delegates making the Treaty of Versailles to be more lenient on them, but when their plan failed the Weimar Republic became very unpopular. When the German people saw the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles they were outraged at the government for accepting such a document. Many Germans, especially German nationalists, went as far as referring to the acceptance of the treaty as treasonous. As the effects of the Treaty of Versailles began to show in Germany, for instance the inflation, the unemployment, and the cut in wages, the German people became even more hostile toward the government that had allowed it to happen. Over time Germans did not regard the Weimar Republic as a legitimate government. Many times the Weimar Republic, created in consideration of the negotiations after World War I, created its own problems. For example, the Weimar Republic was exceedingly lenient to its opponents in Germany and furthermore it gave former Imperial officials positions in its civil service and courts and these people openly professed anti-republican feelings. These actions undermined the government that the German
people were already hostile to because of the affect that the Treaty of Versailles was having on their country. Before long the German people were looking for a leader who shared their feelings about the Treaty of Versailles and their desire to make Germany strong once again, and they would find that leader in Adolf Hitler.

Hitler and the Treaty of Versailles, along with the beginning of World War II, are all directly connected. The Treaty of Versailles led to the rise of fascism and Hitler in Germany and to the beginning of World War II. Hitler established the Nazi Party in 1919 and in the following years his number of supporters grew steadily. Hitler capitalized on the German resentment of the Treaty of Versailles. He was an ardent nationalist as were many Germans, as a result of how weak the Treaty of Versailles had made their nation. The national anthem of the Reich, “Deutschland, Deutschland uber Alles” (“Germany, Germany above all else.”) drew in the German people who felt that their nation needed help out of the low that the Treaty of Versailles had put it in. The German people were calling out for the end of effects of the Treaty of Versailles and the end to the Weimar Republic, and these were the main themes in Nazi propaganda. Hitler was a very charismatic person who was able to gain massive support by denouncing the Treaty of Versailles and the Weimar Republic that the German people hated so much. The inflation created by the reparation terms of the Treaty of Versailles destroyed the German middle class, and what had been the most stable part of German politics quickly became hostile and easily recruited by Hitler. The German people also joined Hitler’s ranks because they could not find jobs and because of the promises of the Nazi party. The German people liked Hitler’s Four Year Plan that called for slum clearance, housing programs, land reclamation, and construction of roads many problems that had been created by the Treaty of Versailles.
Hitler was the culmination of what the German people wanted when he told a storm trooper "I'll get rid of Versailles..." The German people believed that he would and on January 30, 1933, Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. Finally, the last step created by the Treaty of Versailles on the road to World War II was complete.

The steps that Hitler took that actually started World War II were all attempts to reverse what the Treaty of Versailles had created. The Treaty of Versailles had created economic problems by demanding reparations, diminishing Germany’s necessary trade, taking away resources and industry, and causing inflation and unemployment. The Treaty of Versailles separated the German people by taking German territory, and an unpopular government was put into place because of the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler was working to fix all of these problems when he took the actions that began World War II. He wanted to rid Germany of its democratic government, he wanted to make Germany powerful economically, militarily, and geographically again, and he wanted to unite the German people. He took the actions to do all of these things. He got rid of the unpopular Weimar Republic when he became Chancellor in 1933. In March 1935 Hitler took steps to begin to restore the military power that the Treaty of Versailles had taken away when he announced the restoration of enlistment and the expansion of the German army. He continued these efforts in June 1935 when he created the Naval Pact with Britain which allowed German naval strength to be expanded until it was thirty-five percent of the British naval establishment. In March 1936 Hitler continued to expand Germany’s military reach and reverse the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles when he ordered that the Rhineland be re-militarized. Hitler then worked to regain the German territory, resources, industries that had been lost due to the Treaty of Versailles and reunite the German people, a problem that was
also created by the treaty. He accomplished part of this goal by annexing Austria in the
“Anschluss” in March 1938.\textsuperscript{74} Hitler’s success continued when Germany was given the
Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia in the Munich Agreement in September 1938.\textsuperscript{75} The final straw
came on September 1, 1939 when Hitler made one more attempt to truly end the restrictions put
on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles when he invaded Poland to get back the Polish Corridor,
World War II began two days later.\textsuperscript{76}

The Treaty of Versailles created major problems in Germany that led to German
resentment and their desire to erase what the treaty had done to their country. The restrictions
that the Treaty of Versailles put on Germany led to economic destruction, an unsatisfactory
government, a radical population, and a separated people. The German people could have
nothing but hate for the treaty and its effects that destroyed their country. The resentment and
desire to restore Germany as it once was created by the Treaty of Versailles led to the rise of
Hitler and fascism in Germany. Hitler’s actions, supported by the German people, to erase the
restrictions put on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles led to the beginning of World War II. If
the Allies’ delegates creating the Treaty of Versailles had been more concerned with the future
of Europe rather than the punishment of Germany, World War II may have never happened. But
with the harshness of the restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles, World War II was inevitable
because it was natural for German people to desire the return of their nation to power and unity.
The Treaty of Versailles was the major cause of World War II.
Endnotes


3 Keynes 82-84.


6 Keynes 67.

7 Grunberger 117.

8 Keynes 52.

9 Mantoux 271.

10 Keynes 66.


12 Macmillan 176.

13 Macmillan 176.

14 Grunberger 55.

15 Mantoux 178.

16 Keynes 169.


18 Hughes and Seligmann 24.

19 Hughes and Seligmann 24.
20 Hughes and Seligmann 24.

21 Grunberger 148.

22 Grunberger 53.


24 Keynes 57.

25 Keynes 64.

26 Grunberger 56.

27 Watt 504.

28 Keynes 65-66.

29 Keynes 17.

30 Keynes 67.

31 Keynes 102-103.

32 Keynes 87.

33 Keynes 82-84.

34 Keynes 87.


36 Bessel 111.

37 Keynes 68.

38 Keynes 101 and 242.

39 Mayer 766.

40 Keynes 69.

41 Keynes 73.

42 Keynes 230.

43 Keynes 229.
44 Keynes 229.
45 Keynes 229.
46 Grunberger 82.
48 Feuchtwanger 247.
49 Feuchtwanger 318.
50 Keynes 70.
51 Keynes 83.
52 Grunberger 116-117.
53 Grunberger 75.
54 Mayer 774.
55 Grunberger 94.
56 Grunberger 56.
57 Grunberger 59.
58 Grunberger 97.
59 Feuchtwanger 316.
60 Grunberger 96.
61 Grunberger 61.
62 Grunberger 69.
63 Grunberger 64.
64 Grunberger 99.
67 Grunberger 109.
68 Grunberger 106.
69 Grunberger 90.
70 Grunberger 93.
71 Watt 501.
72 Grunberger 122.
73 Grunberger 124.
74 Watt 501.
75 Grunberger 139.
76 Grunberger 148.
Bibliography


