The Treaty of Versailles: Long-term cause of WWII

The Versailles Conference
World War I ended on 11 November 1918 when Germany signed the ‘Armistice’. The Versailles conference was opened in January 1919 and the Germans were forced to sign the Treaty on 28 June 1919. THE ‘BIG THREE’ negotiators at Versailles were Georges Clemenceau (President of France), Woodrow Wilson (President of America) and David Lloyd George (Prime Minister of Britain).

- Clemenceau wanted revenge and punishment – to ‘make Germany pay’ until Germany was too weak to attack France again.
- Lloyd George SAID he wanted to make Germany pay, but he really wanted to protect the British Empire and trade by a lasting peace which would not ruin Germany

The Treaty of Versailles
The only answer here is that you have to learn the terms off by heart:
1. By clause 231 of the Treaty, Germany had to accept blame ‘for all the loss and damage’ of the war.
2. The Germans were allowed no submarines or airplanes, only 6 battleships, their army was reduced to 100,000 men and the Rhineland was de-militarized.
3. Germany had to pay £6,600 million reparations.
4. Germany lost Alsace-Lorraine (to France), the Saar coalfield (to France for 15 years) and West Prussia and Upper Silesia (to Poland). Danzig became a ‘free city’ and all the German colonies became ‘mandates’ of the League of Nations.
5. The Treaty of Versailles set up the League of Nations.
6. Germany was forbidden to unite (Anschluss) with Austria.

Although it is not directly in the syllabus, you need to know that the principles of the Treaty of Versailles were applied to the peace treaties for the whole of Europe after the War – Saint Germain (with Austria, 1919), Neuilly (with Bulgaria, 1919), Trianon (with Hungary, 1920) and Sèvres (with Turkey, 1920).
Nine new nation-states were set up (Poland, Finland, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), and the Treaty of Sevres dismantled the Turkish Empire.

**Reactions to the Treaty**

MUCH more important were the reactions of the different parties to the treaty:

The Germans were furious. They had not been consulted during the making of the Treaty, the Treaty bore no relation to Wilson’s 14 Points (which they thought was going to be the basis of the treaty – e.g. Austria did not get self-determination), and they believed that the Treaty was simply an attempt to destroy Germany. Count Brockdorff-Rantzau said of the war-guilt clause: ‘Such a confession in my mouth would be a lie’. The *Deutsche Zeitung* attacked ‘the disgraceful treaty’. In March 1920 there was a rebellion in Germany – called the Kapp Putsch – against the Treaty. But even the people who made the Treaty were dissatisfied with it.

- **Clemenceau** LIKED Clause 231, disarmament, Reparations and Alsace-Lorraine BUT he wanted Germany split up.
- **Wilson** GOT League of Nations and self-determination for the countries of eastern Europe BUT he could not get disarmament or freedom for the colonies AND the American Senate refused to sign Treaty or join League of Nations.
- **Lloyd George** LIKED reducing German navy and getting British mandates BUT he thought the Treaty was too harsh and would cause another war in 25 years time.

Historians have suggested that – because of this – the Treaty of Versailles CAUSED the Second World War. Firstly, it infuriated the Germans, who were just waiting for an opportunity to get revenge, but secondly it demoralized the allies, who therefore could not bring themselves to make Germany obey the Treaty when Hitler started breaking it in the 1930s (thus the Treaty directly caused appeasement).
Reparations
Particularly, the Allies failed to enforce the treaty provisions relating to REPARATIONS:

- In March 1921, French, British and Belgian troops invaded the Ruhr to force Germany to agree to reparations.
- In January 1923, French and Belgian troops invaded the Ruhr to force Germany to pay reparations (this was a disaster, and caused hyperinflation in Germany).
- In April 1924, the Dawes Plan gave Germany longer to pay reparations, and granted huge loans to get the German economy going. (In June 1929, the Young Plan reduced reparations.)
- On 8 September 1926, Germany was admitted to the League of Nations.

The League of Nations
Wilson was more bothered about the League than about anything else. The League was his ‘parliament’ which would solve international disputes by discussion, and would do away with war.

The first 26 points of the Treaty of Versailles formed the Articles of the League (known as the ‘Covenant’; the principles that every member country promised to follow). These laid down the aims of the League (to stop war, uphold the Treaty of Versailles, organize disarmament and promote the health and well-being of people via the League’s economic and social agencies. The Treaty also laid down the powers/methods of the League – the ‘Community of Power’ (acting together), arbitration (acting as a referee) and sanctions (stopping trade). The Treaty said the League could raise an army, but – since this would have to be paid for by the countries which provided the soldiers, it never did.

The main meetings of the League was the Assembly (held once a year/decisions only by unanimous vote) – although it had a smaller Council (met 4-5 times a year, with 5 permanent members - Britain, France, Italy, Japan and, after 1936, Germany – each with a veto) which dealt with crises. The League also had a number of ‘agencies’ to do its economic and social work: the Court of International Justice, the Health Committee (later the WHO), the International Labor Organization, the Refugees Committee, the Slavery Commission and the Mandates Commission (monitored former German colonies which were being administered by France and Britain).
Successes of the League in the 1920s
Initially, the League seemed to do quite well. It took its authority from the Treaty of Versailles – a treaty agreed to by almost all the countries in the world – and it counted many countries as active members (42 countries at the start, 60 by the 1930s). The leading members – Britain and France, helped by Japan and Italy – were world powers. Four significant successes were:

1. Aaland Islands, 1921: arbitration: the League said the islands should belong to Finland. Both Sweden and Finland agreed.
4. Other successes: 400,000 Prisoners of War were returned to their homes, and in 1922 the League intervened to help Turkish refugees. The League did a lot of stop leprosy, it closed down some drugs companies in Switzerland, and it organized attacks on slave owners in Africa and Burma.

Weaknesses and Failure
However, the League had serious weaknesses. It was pledged to uphold the Treaty of Versailles, which everybody hated; this made it unpopular. Its Secretariat (which did all administration, including tracking millions of missing persons after the War) was woefully undermanned. Its powers – arbitration and condemnation – were ‘moral’ arguments that a determined country could ignore, and many countries refused to agree to sanctions because they damaged the member countries as much as the country that was doing wrong. Worst of all, it lacked the support of the really powerful nations; America was never a member, the USSR not until 1934, Germany only in 1926-33, and Britain and France would not use their armies – instead they followed the policy of appeasement. The crisis in Corfu, in 1923, proved to be an omen of things to come: an Italian General Tellini was murdered, so Italy occupied Corfu. The League ordered Mussolini to leave, but Italy was big and strong enough to ignore it – in the end, the League forced Greece to pay compensation to Italy.

The League depended on nations agreeing. This proved possible to achieve in the prosperous 1920s, but failed in the economic depression
of the 1930s. The League therefore failed in the 1930s:

- **1931**: Disarmament: the conference was wrecked by Germany, which demanded equality with the other countries.
- **1931**: Manchuria: Japan invaded Manchuria. The League sent officials (took a year), then said that Japan ought to return Manchuria – so in February 1933 Japan resigned from the League. The members of the League could not agree to economic sanctions or even an arms sales ban, so nothing was done.
- **1935**: Abyssinia: Mussolini invaded Abyssinia. The League objected, but Italy ignored it and Britain and France secretly agreed to give Abyssinia to Italy! Attempts to impose sanctions on arms sales, rubber and metals failed. So nothing happened.
- **1933–1939**: Germany: rearmed (1933–), re-occupied Rhineland (1936), Anschluss with Austria (1938), given Sudetenland (1938), invaded Poland (1939).

These failures killed the League – countries lost faith in the League, left and began to prepare for war instead. In this way, the failure of the League was one of the causes of World War Two.

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**Hitler as a Cause of World War Two**

So far, we have seen how historians have blamed both the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations for helping to cause World War Two – mainly because they FAILED to keep the peace.

Most historians, however, blame Adolf Hitler as a POSITIVE cause of war. Hitler came to power with aims in foreign policy which he had stated clearly in *Mein Kampf* (1924) – he was determined to destroy the Treaty of Versailles, defeat Communism and make Germany great. Some historians claim that Hitler intended a World War from the very beginning, others merely that – in pursuing these aims – he systematically drew Europe into war:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Action 1</th>
<th>Action 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Rearmament</td>
<td>Hitler built up his army, navy and air force in secret, then openly.</td>
<td>Britain and France did nothing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>Rhineland</td>
<td>He sent the Germany army back</td>
<td>Britain and France did</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Region</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Response of Other Nations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
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<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>He got the Austrian Nazis to make trouble, then invaded Austria.</td>
<td>Britain and France did nothing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>Sudetenland</td>
<td>He got Sudetenland Nazis to cause trouble, and threatened to invade.</td>
<td>At Munich, Chamberlain gave Hitler the Sudetenland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Czechoslovakia</td>
<td>Hitler invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia</td>
<td>Britain promised to defend Poland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>He got the Danzig Germans to cause trouble. He made an alliance with Russia, agreeing to split up Poland. Then he invaded.</td>
<td>Britain declared war.</td>
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**Appeasement**

What were the other nations of Europe doing whilst Hitler was doing this? By the 1930s, Britain and France had ditched the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations as the way to keep the peace, and were pursuing instead a policy which came to be called ‘appeasement’.

Nowadays the British Prime Minister Chamberlain and the French Prime Minister Daladier are often represented as weak and spineless cowards who gave the bully Hitler what he wanted in the hope that it would prevent a war. However, Chamberlain and Daladier saw it merely as ‘being reasonable’; allowing Hitler’s ‘reasonable’ claims in the belief that he was a reasonable man who would stop when he had achieved his aims. Besides this, there were strong arguments for a policy of appeasement in the 1930s:

1. Chamberlain feared another war would destroy civilization.
2. The British people wanted peace and as leader of a democracy.
3. Many British people agreed with Hitler that the Treaty of Versailles...
was not fair.
4. Many British people feared Russia more than Germany.
5. Many British people felt that events in Europe were not Britain’s business.
6. Britain was too weak to help – Munich gave Britain 1 year to rearm. However, both Hitler and Stalin saw it as cowardice and weakness. The historian AJP Taylor blamed Chamberlain and Daladier for World War II – he argued that by continually giving in to Hitler they TEMPTED Hitler to go further and further, and thus encouraged him into war (like entrapment).

The policy of appeasement ended during the year after Munich (1938-9). Perhaps the greatest cause of this change was Hitler’s invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 (which showed he could not be trusted and turned the British people against him). Another major incident was the German Nazis’ attacks on the Jews on Kristallnacht in November, 1938 (which convinced British people that the Nazis were evil). Winston Churchill’s speeches continually warned people about Hitler, and of the need to stand up to him.

**The Nazi Soviet Pact**
In August 1939, Hitler and Stalin made an alliance. Hitler gave Stalin half of Poland to let him invade Poland – it was the final cause of the war, because it gave Hitler the go-ahead to invade Poland. Yet Stalin had originally asked Britain for an alliance with Russia against Hitler! Why did this not happen?

The British feared Communism. They went slowly. They sent a minor official who did not have the power to make decisions. Stalin did not trust Britain. He thought that if he allied himself to Britain he would end up fighting Hitler on his own.

Hitler moved quickly. He sent Ribbentrop, a senior government minister. He offered Stalin half of Poland. Stalin hated Hitler, but if he allied himself with Hitler he would get half of Poland without fighting, and he would have more time to prepare for war with Germany.