The Unintended Consequences of the Treaty of Versailles

The Treaty of Versailles was a complex document that had many consequences for the people and government of Germany. A range of factors combined to undermine the ability of the infant democratic republic to govern successfully, including: the 'War Guilt' Clause; the requirement to pay Reparations; terms relating to trading conditions and others relating to the things such as the armed forces and Germany's empire.

The very fact that the treaty was signed can be seen as undermining the Weimar Republic. Almost immediately there were claims that the troops had been 'stabbed in the back' by the government. Though this was very much a case of denial on the part of the right-wing elite that had governed Germany through the war, and who were responsible for the manner in which the war was waged and ultimately lost, this was immediately significant. From day one of its existence, the government would have to answer these charges and attempt to pacify those elements of society who couldn’t accept that the war had been lost.

Germany had no say in the formulation of the treaty and was forced to agree to the terms of the treaty regardless of whether its people liked them or not. Over time, other European powers came to realize that the original terms had been too strict. When Hitler broke the treaty many years later, the reticence of the other powers to react immediately was taken as an indication that many of them agreed with Hitler that the treaty had been implemented wrongly anyway. In effect, the Treaty of Versailles didn’t settle any disputes; it created more issues between countries already fractious and struggling to recover from the last war.

A significant sticking point was a clause in the treaty that made provisions for the Rhineland (which borders France and Belgium) to become a demilitarized zone - Germany would be prohibited from stationing any military troops in the Rhineland. Additionally, Germany was ordered to disarm, supposedly the first step towards world disarmament, but no one else was encouraged to join Germany in disarmament. Germany would technically be defenseless should France decide to invade them - which they eventually did in 1923 when Germany was unable to pay the reparations owed to France that year.

Reparations - effectively a 'fine' for the damage done by Germany in 1914-18 - was possibly the most unpopular part of the Treaty of Versailles. At the end of the war, land had been destroyed all over Europe, but especially in France. The treaty said that Germany had to make reparations by paying regular sums of money to France. What this clause failed to recognize was that the war had equally damaged Germany's economy and they simply could not afford to pay. The German solution to this was, in retrospect, foolish - they printed more money. The effect was that the German currency devalued to the point where the economy was on the verge of total collapse. This issue of reparations was eventually solved by the Dawes Plan and Germany was able to pay France again.

When Adolf Hitler rose to power in the early 1930s, he took advantage of the consequences of the Treaty of Versailles. He used the idea that the Germans had been stabbed in the back by the creators of the German republic and had never truly lost the war to win favor. He exploited the economic instability and used the production of war goods to improve the economy. He used German feelings of betrayal to gain support. The Treaty of Versailles and its consequences for the German people are a clear cause of World War II.