

2.1 The origins of World War II

When World War I came to an end on 11 November 1918, French president Georges Clemenceau commented, 'We've won the war; now we have to win the peace and it may be more difficult.' Just over 20 years later, the world was once again at war.

World War II broke out on 1 September 1939 and officially ended on 2 September 1945. It had its origins in:

- the Treaty of Versailles, the Allies' flawed peace settlement with Germany following World War I
- the expansionist policies of Germany, Italy and Japan in the 1930s
- the weaknesses of the international peace-keeping body, the League of Nations
- the failure of Britain and France's appeasement policy (see later in this unit).

The Treaty of Versailles, 28 June 1919

As a condition of granting Germany's request for an **armistice**, the United States demanded that Germany form a new and democratic government. On 9 November 1918, Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated. Amid large-scale civil unrest, Germany's two socialist parties (the SPD and the USPD) formed a new government and announced elections that would make Germany a **democratic republic**.

Key groups within Germany were bitterly opposed to this idea, including the left-wing Spartacists (communists), who staged an unsuccessful attempt to take power in January 1919. The **right-wing** conservatives within the *Reichswehr* (the German army), the civil service and the judiciary were also opposed to becoming a democratic republic. They did not want to implement the reforms put forward by the government of Germany's new **Weimar Republic** and were especially hostile to its acceptance of the terms of the Versailles peace treaty.

Treaty terms

The armistice of 11 November 1918 brought about the ceasefire that ended World War I. In January 1919, the victorious Allies met at the Paris Peace Conference to decide the terms they would impose on Germany and on each of the defeated Central Powers.

On 7 May 1919, after much disagreement and discussion (none involving Germany), the Allies presented the German delegation with their terms. The terms were harsh and the German government had three weeks to propose amendments. The Allies addressed some of these in Germany's favour. Germany had little choice other than to accept the rest. On 28 June 1919, Germany's representatives signed the treaty at the Palace of Versailles outside Paris (see source 2).

armistice: an agreement between opposing sides to stop fighting as a prelude to making peace

democratic republic: a government run on democratic principles with an elected rather than a hereditary head of state

right-wing: describes people supporting nationalism, traditional values and the maintenance of social order, as opposed to those of the left wing, who support change to create economic, political and social equality

Weimar Republic: the name of the German government from late 1918 to early 1933

Source 1

Diagram showing Germany's main losses under the Treaty of Versailles

Source question

Use source 1 to explain why the Treaty of Versailles made many Germans angry.

The 'war guilt' clause

Under Article 231, Germany had to accept sole blame for starting the war.

Reparations

The 'war guilt' clause justified the Allies' demand that Germany pay reparations — an amount set in 1921 at £6600 million.

Germany's main losses under the Treaty of Versailles

Military restrictions

- Army limited to 100 000 men
- Conscription banned, volunteers only
- Navy limited to 15 000 men and 6 battleships, submarines banned
- No airforce
- Heavy artillery, poison gas, tanks banned
- No German troops allowed in the Rhineland (on the French border)

Loss of land and resources

- Loss of overseas colonies
- Loss of West Prussia, Posen, Upper Silesia, part of East Prussia, Alsace, Lorraine, North Schleswig, Eupen and Malmedy
- Forbidden to unite with Austria
- Loss of 16% of coal sources
- Loss of 10% of land

Source 2

The signing of peace in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles, 28 June 1919, by Irish artist Sir William Orpen (1878–1931), 1919. The image shows the Allied leaders at the centre of the long table and the two German representatives at the small table in front of them.

Australian Prime Minister William Morris Hughes

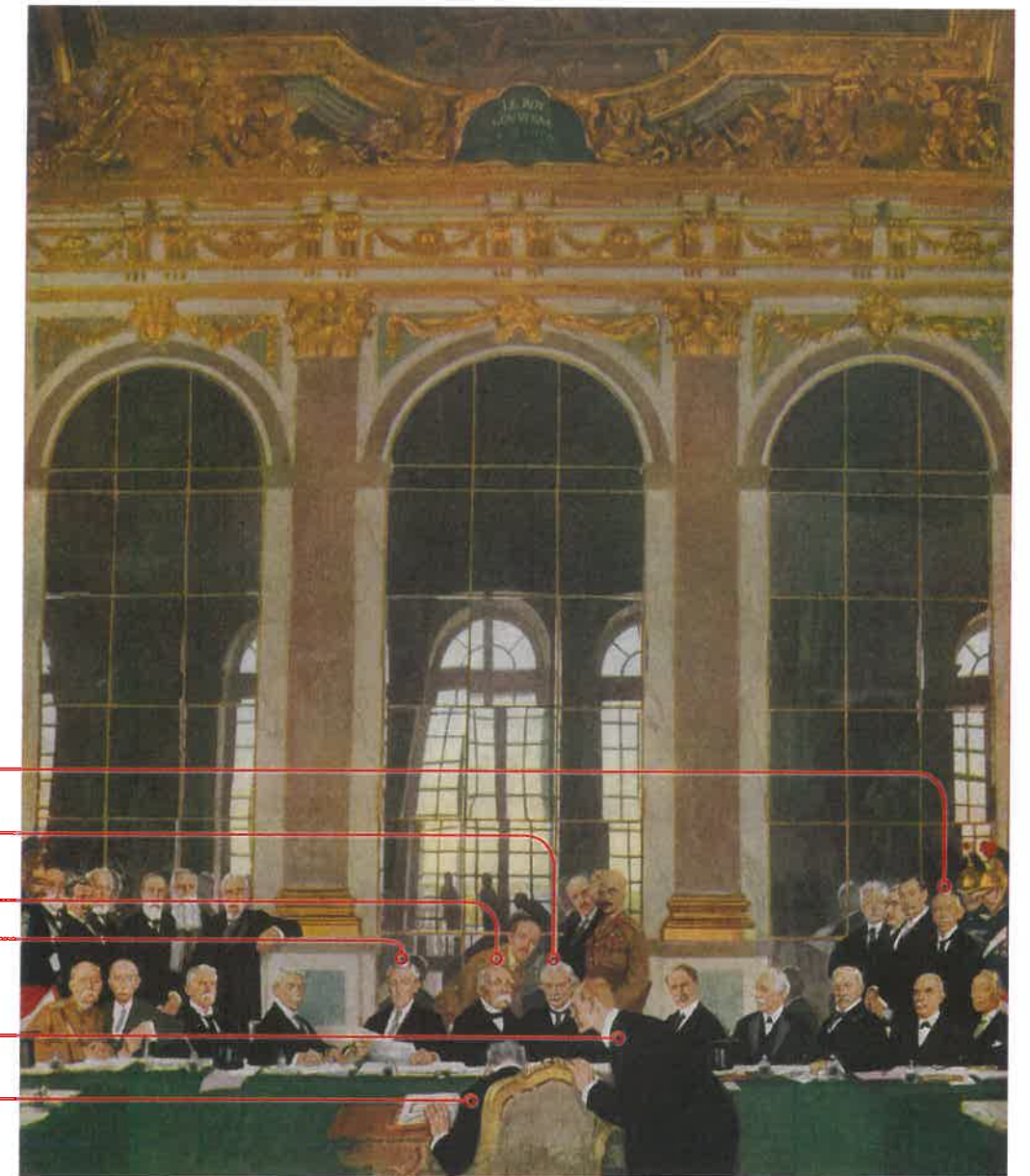
British Prime Minister Lloyd George

French President Georges Clemenceau

US President Woodrow Wilson

German Minister for Foreign Affairs Hermann Müller

German Minister for Colonial Affairs Dr Johannes Bell



RETROFILE

The signing of the Treaty of Versailles (pronounced *vair-sigh*) occurred on the fifth anniversary of the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. It took place in the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles, where Germany had humiliated France in 1871 by making it sign a treaty giving away the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. On 3 October 2010, Germany made its final reparations payment — the sum of £59.5 million (£69.9 million).