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### Was the Treaty of Versailles harsh?

At the end of World War One, the victorious allies came together at the Palace of Versailles to discuss, among other things, how Germany should be treated now that they had been defeated. The Paris Peace Conference was quickly dominated by the leaders of the USA, Great Britain and France: Woodrow Wilson, David Lloyd George, and Georges Clemenceau respectively. Known as the 'Big Three', these men – who had very different views as to what they wanted from Germany and to what degree the country should be punished. Once the Treaty of Versailles was finally published and the terms made public, a debate immediately sprang up centring on whether it dealt too leniently with Germany or too harshly. Of course, this argument might depend upon your viewpoint (as most arguments do), but can we find evidence for both sides?

| Patrick's arguments that the Treaty was harsh                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Elliott's arguments that the Treaty was fair                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
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| The Treaty of Versailles was a punitive treaty which blamed Germany solely and exclusively for the outbreak of WW1. The infamous 'War Guilt Clause' - Article 231 - stated that Germany was wholly responsible for causing the conflict. This was clearly unfair and was included to legitimize the French desire to financially cripple Germany to the sum of GBP6.6 billion in reparations. The Treaty of Versailles was indeed 'harsh' because it aimed to ravage rather than rehabilitate Germany. | When Russia surrendered to Germany in 1918, the subsequent peace treaty they were forced to sign (Brest-Litovsk) was improbably harsh. Historian Spencer Tucker wrote: "The German General Staff had formulated extraordinarily harsh terms that shocked even the German negotiator". The argument thus runs that the Germans were simply getting the same treatment as they meted out to Russia. There is also an argument to me made that, had Germany won the war, they would have exacted an equally harsh treaty from GB, France, and the USA. |
| Germany signed an armistice on 11 November 1918 on the basis of US President Wilson's '14 Points', which advocated for a new era of international relations based on self-determination and an impartial League of Nations. However, the architects of the Treaty of Versailles treated Germany like a defeated nation – Germany was not invited to negotiate the Treaty, but merely forced to sign it. In this sense, the Treaty of Versailles was a vengeful and unfair 'diktat'.                    | Many of the terms of the Treaty – especially the reparations figure – weren't as harsh as they might have been. Wilson and Lloyd spent a great deal of time tempering Clemenceau's desire for a vengeful settlement that would ruin Germany. In a sense, Germany was 'lucky' the Treaty was not harsher.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| The Treaty of Versailles was unreasonably harsh in terms of what it took from Germany. She lost all her colonies, Alsace-Lorraine, the coal-rich Saar region was to be mined by France and administered by the League of Nations, her army was limited to a feeble 100,000, no air force, no submarines, no tanks, GBP 6.6 billion in reparations, plus cattle and sheep were to be given to France and Belgium.                                                                                       | Germany had destroyed large swathes of France and Russia. Much of the war was fought on these lands and thus their economic and physical infrastructure was left in need of vital repair. In addition, millions of people in these countries had died leaving significant holes in industrial employment. Someone would have to pay for rebuilding. Germany caused the damage, so they should have to pay.                                                                                                                                          |
| Historian Niall Ferguson summarises the punitive nature of the Treaty of Versailles well; "...when all had been drafted and signed, it looked like just another version of the familiar old story: to the victor the spoils. As the historian H.A.L Fisher put it, the peace treaties draped 'the crudity of conquest' in 'the veil of morality'."                                                                                                                                                     | Germany's actions led to the wider involvement of Britain, France and the USA – not to mention many other countries – and so, they must bear responsibility for the consequences. The spoils of war go to the victors, only those who have lost would ever dare say otherwise. The Treaty of Versailles was just rewards for the victors and just desserts for the losers.                                                                                                                                                                          |