

TREATY OF VERSAILLES (1871)

TREATY AT A GLANCE

Completed

February 26, 1871, at Versailles, France

Signatories

Germany and France

Overview

The Treaty of Versailles was the preliminary peace treaty ending the Franco-Prussian War and marking the creation of a unified German empire, which had been proclaimed on January 18, 1871, in the very place at which the present treaty was signed, the Hall of Mirrors of the Palace of Versailles.

Historical Background

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 was momentous for European civilization, bringing about the fall of the Second French Empire, providing the impetus to the creation of the German Empire, and figuring as the first modern European war, in which both combatant nations used railroads, the telegraph, modern rifles, and modern rifled, breech-loading artillery.

The nominal cause of the war was neither more nor less trivial than the causes of most European wars—in this case, the candidacy of a Hohenzollern prince for the Spanish throne. The deeper issue, however, was Prussia's growing power in Germany, which Emperor Napoleon III correctly saw as a threat to French security. For his part, Prussia's extraordinarily astute prime minister, Otto von Bismarck, deliberately exploited the issue of the Spanish succession to goad France into an act of war designed to frighten the south German states into joining the North German Confederation, organized in 1867 with Prussia the dominant member. On July 13, 1870, the Prussian king, who would become Kaiser Wilhelm I, sent a message to Napoleon III reporting a quite innocuous meeting with the French ambassador. Bismarck, edited this, the so-called Ems Telegram, to imply that the meeting had been an exchange of insults. In receipt of the telegram, the French course seemed either to accept a diplomatic defeat or to go to war.

With his government's prestige faltering at home, Napoleon III judged that he could ill afford to suffer an insult at the hands of Prussia, and he declared war on July 19, 1870. Unfortunately, Napoleon III had failed to consider that a military defeat was far worse than a

diplomatic one. His armies were badly outnumbered and, even worse, outgeneraled. They quickly withdrew from the frontier—one army to Metz, where it was held under siege, and the other to Sedan, where it was quickly crushed. Napoleon III surrendered the army of Sedan as well as himself to Bismarck on September 2, 1870.

The humiliation of Sedan reached Paris two days later, and the Third Republic was proclaimed. In its name, the Government of National Defense carried on the war, or attempted to. From September 23 to January 28, Paris was besieged and then bombarded by German artillery. On January 28 the new government sued for peace, concluding an armistice that allowed France three weeks in which to elect a national assembly with authority to negotiate a peace in the name of France.

When the elections created an assembly overwhelmingly in favor of peace, the Treaty of Versailles was concluded.

Terms

The Versailles document was characterized by the legendary Prussia passion for efficiency. Without preamble, it began:

ARTICLE I

France renounces in favor of the German Empire all her Rights and Titles over the Territories situated on the East of the Frontier hereafter described.

The Line of Demarcation begins at the Northwest Frontier of the Canton of Cattenom, towards the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, follows on the South

the Western Frontiers of the Cantons of Cattenom and Thionville, passes by the Canton of Briey, along the Western Frontiers of the Communes of Montjois-la-Montagne and Roncourt, as well as the Eastern Frontiers of the Communes of Marie-aux-Chênes, St. Ail, Habonville, reaches the Frontier of the Canton de Gooze (which it crosses along the Communal Frontiers of Vionville, Bouxières, and Onville), follows the Southwest Frontier, south of the District of Metz, the Western Frontier of the District of Château-Salins, as far as the Commune of Pettoncourt, taking in the Western and Southern Frontiers thereof to follow the Crest of the Mountains between Seille and Moncel, as far as the Frontier of the District of Sarrebourg, to the South of Garde. The demarcation afterwards coincides with the Frontier of that District as far as the Commune of Tanconville, reaching the Frontier to the North thereof, from thence it follows the Crest of the Mountains between the Sources of the White Sarre and Vezouze, as far as the Frontier of the Canton of Schirmeck, skirts the Western Frontier of that Canton, includes the Communes of Saales, Bourg-Bruche, Colroy-la-Rochet Plaine, Ranruptt-Saulxures, and St. Blaise-la-Roche of the Canton of Saales, and coincides with the Western Frontier of the Departments of the Lower Rhine and the Upper Rhine as far as the Canton of Belfort. The Southern Frontier of which it leaves not far from Vourvenans, to cross the Canton of Delle at the Southern Limits of the Communes of Bourogne and Froide Fontaine, and to reach the Swiss Frontier skirting the Eastern Frontiers of the Communes of Jonchery and Delle.

The German Empire shall possess these Territories in perpetuity in all Sovereignty and Property. An International Commission, composed of an equal number of Representatives of the two High Contracting Parties, shall be appointed immediately after the exchange of the Ratifications of the present Treaty, to trace on the spot the new Frontier, in conformity with the preceding stipulations.

This Commission shall preside over the Division of the Lands and Funds, which have hitherto belonged to Districts or Communes divided by the new Frontiers; in case of disagreement in the tracing and the measures of execution, the Members of the Commission shall refer to their respective Governments.

The Frontier, such as it has just been described, is marked in green on two identical copies of the Map of the Territory forming the Government of Alsace, published at Berlin in September 1870, by the Geographical and Statistical Division of the Staff, and a copy of which shall be annexed to both copies of the present Treaty.

Nevertheless, the alteration of the above tracing has been agreed to by the two Contracting Parties. In the former Department of the Moselle, the Villages of Marie-aux-Chenes near St. Privat-la-Montagne, and Vionville to the west of Rezonville, shall be ceded to Germany. In exchange thereof, France shall retain the Town and Fortifications of Belfort, with a Radius which shall be hereafter determined upon.

In addition to ceding Alsace and much of Lorraine to Germany, France agreed to pay an indemnity of unprecedented proportions: 5 billion francs (Article 2). Article 7 provided for negotiations toward a "Definitive Treaty of Peace," which resulted in the TREATY OF FRANKFURT:

ARTICLE VII

The opening of negotiations for the Definitive Treaty of Peace to be concluded on the Basis of the present Preliminaries shall take place at Brussels, immediately after the Ratification of the latter by the National Assembly and by His Majesty the Emperor of Germany.

Consequences

The treaty marked the coming to prominence of one of the greatest diplomats in European history, Otto von Bismarck, who would go on over the course of the next 20 years virtually to create modern Europe. More immediately, having succeeded by the war in persuading all the German rulers to join together in forming a new German Empire under Kaiser Wilhelm I, Bismarck declared the new empire from the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles on January 18, 1871. The empire would thrive and expand until Germany's defeat in World War I.