



TREATY OF VERSAILLES (1919) EVIDENCE RATING ACTIVITY

Overview

The Treaty of Versailles officially ended World War I when it was signed by the Big Three allied partners – France, Great Britain, and the United States (Italy withdrew before signing) – on June 28, 1919, in the Hall of Mirrors in Paris. The Treaty took months to negotiate, and that was without the presence of German negotiators (who were barred because of their status as enemies during, and instigators of, the war), though there were hundreds of diplomats from a large number of European nations involved.

Germany and Austria-Hungary lost more than 3 million men in the “war to end all wars,” but France itself lost nearly half that number, and had another 2.5 million soldiers wounded, and for this and other reasons France pushed hard during the negotiations for an outcome that would have Germany pay severe reparations and for the German war machine to be permanently smashed. While France forwarded a highly anti-German hardline, Great Britain wished to prop Germany back up to some extent, looking for a buffer and counter-weight to the possibility of a revived and remilitarized Russia after the war. Badly damaged by the war, Italy advocated for its own interests, seeking a more narrow restoration of its territorial and financial losses.

The United States, under the presidency of Democrat Woodrow Wilson, pursued an idealistic vision of a world that could be healed and nations that could learn from the horrible lesson of World War I that there was no sane alternative to peaceful co-existence. Wilson advocated for a set of Fourteen Points that codified his vision, though the only point that made it to the final version of the Treaty was his call for a League of Nations, a forerunner to the United Nations founded after World War II in 1945.

Negotiations concluded with a compromise among the Allies. The final Treaty of Versailles had Germany paying billions of dollars in reparations (of \$5 billion), though the enforcement provision for those payments was not strong. Germany gave up significant territories, but most of those they had captured during WWI. Their war machine was damaged and then kept small, but not permanently.



Historians have debated, with increasing volume, about the Treaty and its effects, particularly of course on the German economic and political system and the lead-up and causes of World War II. The debatable issue for this activity is a formulation of this historical question.

Was the Treaty of Versailles a relatively balanced and just agreement, given Germany's actions during WWI, or was it overly harsh and ineffective, creating the conditions that led to the rise of Nazism and the start of WWII?

In this activity students will focus on the evidence that supports various claims made on both sides of the issue. They will examine the evidence closely and carefully, and think through its qualities relative to the criteria for effective use of evidence in academic argument. Students will rate each piece of evidence on this criteria and then justify their ratings. Finally, students will share their ratings with a partner, paying special attention to the instances in which they disagreed in their ratings, coming to a consensus or agreeing to disagree on their ratings. Student pairs will share out in a classroom-wide discussion of the evidence – its implications for unit content knowledge and its representative functioning in academic argumentation.

Process and Method

1. Screen the Treaty of Versailles video twice, asking argument-based questions in between screenings.
2. Each student should be given a copy of the Evidence Rating System and the Evidence Rating Form.
3. The teacher should review the criteria for the effective use of evidence in academic argument. Models and exemplars should be given to illustrate effective and less effective use of evidence for each criterion.
4. Students should be given about 25 minutes to complete the Evidence Rating Form. They should work independently, with the teacher circulating to answer questions, give suggestions, and monitor work.
5. Students should then be paired up (even if they are not fully finished). In pairs they should discuss their ratings and justifications, paying special attention to the instances in which their ratings differed. They should see if they come to a consensus on a rating, or agree to disagree.
6. Pairs should be asked to share out. The teacher should lead a classroom-wide discussion. Students should turn in their Evidence Rating Forms for formative assessment.

Evidence Rating System

Students will use the system below to rate each piece of evidence on each criteria for the effective use of evidence in academic argument. The ratings are on a 5-point scale, so students will put a number in each criterion box. The rating descriptors are as follows:

- 5 -- **Highly effective, impressive, persuasive, needs little to no improvement**
- 4 -- **Effective, solid satisfaction of the criterion, but some improvement possible**
- 3 -- **Mixed, partially effective, partially ineffective, something to build on but in need of significant revision/improvement**
- 2 -- **Minimally effective, flawed, insufficient satisfaction of the criterion, should be substantially revised/improved**
- 1 -- **Highly ineffective, highly flawed example of argumentation, should be fully re-written or re-worked**

There are four basic criteria for the effective use of evidence in academic argument.

- | | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Alignment (A) | Is the evidence presented closely aligned with the argumentative claim? Does it directly support the specific claim being made, or is it imprecisely aligned or not relevant? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Credibility (C) | Is the evidence from a credible source? Or is the source biased or lacking credentials? Is the evidence authoritative? Does it contain internal credibility – meaning, does the paraphrase or quote include the warrants for the source’s viewpoint, or is it declarative without explaining the basis for its conclusion? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Sufficiency (S) | Is the evidence sufficient to make the claim convincing? Is the evidence credible? Are its sources authoritative? Are its sources varied, or are the sources too narrow? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Reasoning (R) | Is each piece of evidence accompanied by a clear and convincing explanation as to how it proves the claim? Does the reasoning demonstrate thoughtfulness and insight? Does the reasoning advance the argument? |

Evidence Rating Form

(1)

Argumentative Claim

The Treaty of Versailles was probably the best agreement that could have been reached, given the very difficult circumstances that faced Europe after the catastrophe of World War I.

Evidence and Reasoning

According to American diplomat Edward Mandell House, in a diary entry of 1920:

Looking at the conference in retrospect, there is much to approve and yet much to regret. It is easy to say what should have been done, but more difficult to have found a way of doing it. To those who are saying that the treaty is bad and should never have been made and that it will involve Europe in infinite difficulties in its enforcement, I feel like admitting it. But I would also say in reply that empires cannot be shattered, and new states raised upon their ruins without disturbance. . . . While I should have preferred a different peace, I doubt very much whether it could have been made, for the ingredients required for such a peace as I would have were lacking at Paris.

Europe was left virtually in ruins by World War I, and those conditions created a nearly impossible set of demands and interests among the countries directly and indirectly involved in the negotiations. It is certainly possible for historians to point to flaws in the final version of the Treaty of Versailles – there were plenty of critics of the Treaty at the time. But few people have been able to credibly suggest that the negotiators could have come to an agreement any more just or balanced. The Treaty made the best of a bleak and conflict-ridden situation.

Ratings

Rate the evidence above on each of the four criteria and justify each of your ratings.

A: []

C: []

S: []

R: []

(2)

Argumentative Claim

The Treaty of Versailles attempted to entangle the United States into subservience to the overly idealistic League of Nations.

Evidence and Reasoning

Senator Cabot Lodge laid out the case against the League of Nations, in a speech on the U.S. Senate floor on August 12, 1919:

The United States is the world's best hope, but if you fetter her in the interests and quarrels of other nations, if you tangle her in the intrigues of Europe, you will destroy her power for good and endanger her very existence. Leave her to march freely through the centuries to come as in the years that have gone. Strong, generous, and confident, she has nobly served mankind. Beware how you trifle with your marvelous inheritance, this great land of ordered liberty, for if we stumble and fall freedom and civilization everywhere will go down in ruin.

Lodge expressed the view common then and now of conservatives: that the United States is an exceptional country and should be very wary of being bound to other countries or an organization of nations, none of whom have the majesty or greatness of ours. He embraced some of the idealism of the President Wilson and the League of Nations supporters, but he argued on strategic grounds that the best way for the U.S. to help the rest of the world was by remaining a completely independent world leader. He rightly saw danger to our ability to defend free and open societies if we give up our own liberty.

Ratings

Rate the evidence above on each of the four criteria and justify each of your ratings.

A: []

C: []

S: []

R: []

(3)

Argumentative Claim

The Treaty of Versailles should be credited for its commitment to lasting peace between nations, as an early light signal of later peace movements, whether or not it was immediately successful

Evidence and Reasoning

In 1921 Woodrow Wilson’s Treasury Secretary Williams Gibbs-McAdoo was quoted in the New York Herald Tribune as explaining,

Whatever may be the imperfections of the Treaty from a political or economic standpoint, Woodrow Wilson did not fail. The outstanding thing for which he fought, the thing that transcends political and economic considerations, is the permanent peace of the world. Unless this is secured all else is failure; without this the sublimest hope of humanity is sunk in the black abyss; without this all political and economic adjustments are unstable and sooner or later will disappear.

Gibbs-McAdoo expresses here a recognition of the need for peace, as humanity’s best hope for an alternative to the irrational and technologically advancing mechanisms of death and destruction that World War I introduced to western civilization. In the face of the shock that was the first world war, Wilson and his defenders (such as Gibbs-McAdoo) realized that humanity might not survive the century if its leaders could not commit themselves to peaceful idealism. The Treaty of Versailles represented the first (and not the last) expression of that commitment.

Ratings

Rate the evidence above on each of the four criteria and justify each of your ratings.

A: []

C: []

S: []

R: []

(4)

Argumentative Claim

The billions of dollars in reparations that Germany was required to pay in the Treaty of Versailles caused a depression in Germany that opened the door for the rise of Nazism in the 1930s.

Evidence and Reasoning

One of the foremost economists of the 20th century, John Maynard Keynes, wrote in *The Economic Consequences of Peace* (1920), that, "I believe that the campaign for securing out of Germany the general costs of the war was one of the most serious acts of political unwisdom for which our statesmen have ever been responsible." Keynes would eventually become one of *Time* magazine's 100 most important people of the century for his development of a highly influential economic theory of the role of government in the economy. During World War I he worked for the British Exchequer (akin to the American Treasury Department), and in that role he believed that the Treaty of Versailles was asking Germany to pay reparations many times more than it was possible for the country to pay. Punishing Germany so severely may have resulted in the very weak economy that Germany experienced in the 1920s and 1930s. It's not hard to imagine that the German people were more open to Nazi propaganda and appeals because they were suffering economically.

Ratings

Rate the evidence above on each of the four criteria and justify each of your ratings.

A: []

C: []

S: []

R: []

(5)

Argumentative Claim

The Treaty of Versailles was actually much more fair to Germany than Germany had intended to be to the Allied powers had it won the war.

Evidence and Reasoning

The British military historian Correlli Barnett claimed that the Treaty of Versailles was "extremely lenient in comparison with the peace terms that Germany herself, when she was expecting to win the war, had had in mind to impose on the Allies" (*The Collapse of British Power*, 2002). Furthermore, he claimed, it was "hardly a slap on the wrist" when contrasted with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk that Germany had imposed on a defeated Russia in March 1918, which had taken away a third of Russia's population, one-half of Russia's industrial undertakings and nine-tenths of Russia's coal mines. Eventually, even under the what many historians have called the "cruel" terms of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany's economy had been restored to its pre-war status. Fair treatment of a nation that begins a world war is an elusive

Ratings

Rate the evidence above on each of the four criteria and justify each of your ratings.

A: []

C: []

S: []

R: []