5 The Rise of Hitler

WILSON'S FOURTEEN POINTS AND THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES

After the failure of the German plan for a lightning war in 1914, both the Western and Eastern Fronts congealed into three years of static trench warfare in which most of the 8 million fatal battle casualties occurred. Attempts at a wide strategic outflanking movement by the British in attacking the Turks in Gallipoli (1915) and Mesopotamia (Iraq, 1914–17) failed. First to crack were the Russians – both cause and effect of their 1917 Revolution. The Germans, free to concentrate on the Western Front, very nearly broke it in March 1918, but the Allies counterattacked in August, including fresh troops from the British Empire and the newly arrived expeditionary force from the USA, which was in action for the first time. The US government warned the Germans that this force was just the beginning, and that they were geared to continue the war into the 1920s. The morale of the exhausted German troops, already depressed by the failure of their spring offensive, began to collapse. The naval blockade, now also reinforced by the US navy, was causing severe shortages in Germany. Faced with the growing spectre of a Communist revolution, Field Marshal Hindenburg (Chief of the General Staff – effectively supreme commander on behalf of the Kaiser – since 1916) persuaded the Kaiser that Germany must ask for an armistice before their troops were driven back in chaos onto German soil1. A temporary armistice was signed in November 1918 and the Treaty of Versailles was signed on 28 June 1919 – the fifth anniversary of the Sarajevo assassination.

The United States had entered the war in April 1917; in January 1918 President Woodrow Wilson announced his Fourteen Points for a proposed peace settlement. These included the evacuation of all German-occupied territories, the return of Alsace Lorraine (ceded in 1871) to France, a free Poland and the creation of independent Baltic states; it applied the principle of self-determination, interpreted as the right of peoples of one race to have the same government if they so wished; there was to
be an impartial settlement of colonial disputes, a reduction in armaments, freedom of the seas and the abolition of secret diplomacy, to be replaced by ‘open covenants openly arrived at’; and the setting up of the League of Nations.2

The peace negotiations began on the basis of these Fourteen Points, but some of the Allied leaders were sceptical, especially the French Prime Minister, Clemenceau, who was determined to destroy Germany’s power completely. He demanded an admission of guilt by Germany and of responsibility for all the damage done (i.e. for reparations) though no figure was included in the treaty. The Allies also reserved the right to maintain the maritime blockade if Germany defaulted on reparations.

None of the defeated powers – Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey or Bulgaria – was invited to Versailles, but all were presented with the dictated terms and given three weeks to sign them (see Map 5.1). Facing the threat of the Allies advancing into Germany, which they knew they could not stop, the Germans had no option but to sign. The terms caused bitter resentment but failed to prevent Germany re-emerging to start (and very nearly win) the Second World War 20 years later.

Nor was Russia represented at Versailles since she was still in a state of civil war and the Bolshevik government was not recognized. Moreover Italy, technically on the winning side, withdrew in protest that the Allies were cheating her out of some of the territorial concessions she claimed had been promised as an incentive to enter the war in 1915.3

Shortly after the signing, the US Congress refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles or the entry of the USA to the League of Nations. President Wilson was not re-elected in 1920, and the United States turned her back on the structure he had designed to keep the peace of the world.4

**THE FAILURE OF THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS**

The League was doomed from the start. Like the UN Security Council, the League Council was intended to have five permanent members – the USA, Britain, France, Italy and Japan. The USA never joined. Japan left in 1933 when the League condemned her invasion of Manchuria, and Italy in 1937, after she invaded Abyssinia. This left only two of the permanent members