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Opposing Interpretation of the Treaty of Versailles in Political Cartoons

The Treaty of Versailles 1919, sparked a series of controversies, injustices, and rivalry in Europe. The fabrication of the treaty directly influenced foreign affairs. The newspaper is a powerful tool for people to communicate with each other. Those who possess access to the press have taken it upon themselves to speak for, influence, or inform the people. Political cartoons served the purpose of criticizing, educating, or imposing a political viewpoint. Two political cartoons published in 1919 show opposing viewpoints of The Treaty of Versailles. Cartoon A, "Der Tag!" depicts Germany's harsh punishment, while also securing Britain that Germany won't be a threat again. On the other hand, cartoon B, "Can He Produce Harmony?" portrays American President Woodrow Wilson as a hero and highlights his deep influence in European affairs. Cartoon A reflects the ally powers constant degradation of Germany, foreshadowing Germany's exasperating attempt to regain respect. Cartoon B shows the United States in a position of power and foreshadows its power abuse and backlash in the interwar years. Both cartoons reflect the public's opinion on the treaty its effect in the international order.

Europe was in ruins at the end of World War I in 1918. The alliance system completely wrecked the European community, causing mistrusts, tensions, and lack of unification. As an effort to solve European affairs, the Paris Peace Conference was conducted. Out of it came the Treaty of Versailles drafted by the big four; David Lloyd George (Great Britain), Georges Clemenceau (France), Woodrow Wilson (United States of America), and Vittorio Orlando (Italy).

Wilson suggested the implementation of The Fourteen Points. "The Fourteen Points included free trade, open diplomacy, arms reductions, and an international organization, the League of Nations, to settle disputes without war. Other points called for national sovereignty for

people in east central Europe.”¹ The rest of the document was 9 points covering new territorial consignments. Under the self determination and national sovereignty clause, Germany loses 10% of its territory and population. Article 231, condemned Germany to take war guilt and with it comes a handful of sanctions, and reparations.

The Triple Entente (Great Britain, France, and Russia), the allies, demanded Germany to pay for all the losses and damage of the war, specially to France and Belgium. By 1921, it was estimated that Germany had to pay around \$33 billion in total loss. The United States saw the economic decay of Germany as an opportunity to increase their presence in Europe, hence drafts Dawes Plan to reform Germany’s economy and achieve economic dominance.²

Aside from the United States’s own agenda, Great Britain and France wanted to ensure that Germany will never be a military threat again. The allies forced disarmament onto Germany. Germany’s threat to the British Royal Navy in Naval Race 1906, and the invasion of Alsace and Lorraine in France, were motives for both countries desire to leave Germany military powerless.

The loans the United States gave the allies to support war efforts, and the little military involvement converted the United States into an economic superpower. Surprisingly, when it came to signing the treaty, the United States does not sign because of congress disapproval.

Lacking the support of the United States invalidated the treaty. In addition, Wilson was the main contributor of the ideology behind it. Without him on board, the treaty seems even more flimsy. The situation seemed rather hypocritical and caused a power struggle dynamic between Europe and the United States.

An ingenious way to mass-communicate with the public, regardless of their level of education, was political cartoons to show the political turmoils the world was facing. In order to

understand them, the viewers need to have a certain political understanding and background knowledge. These cartoons are opinion based and criticize the world of politics. They are mainly satirical and include metaphors to represent people or concepts.³ Artists hyperbolize situations and characters in their drawings, however, facts are never altered in the drawings.⁴ A successful “political cartoons can fulfill an important criticizing and controlling function in society. In addition, political cartoons can encourage the process of opinion formation and decision making as well as provide entertaining perspectives on the news.”⁵

Cartoon A is “Der Tag!”, translates to ‘The Day’, also known as Bitter Pill. It was a British cartoon⁶ published on the *Daily Express* in London on May 7 1919,⁷ the artist is unknown. The *Daily Express* criticizes the War Guilt Clause, article 231, of the Treaty of Versailles. “The Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.”⁸

An older man with glasses, mustache, lack of hair, and a bandaid on his head is depicted as Germany, which is shown through the German military uniform he is wearing. The man is being squeezed by a big fist, and it clear that he is both helpless and injured. The injury represents that Germany is already socially and economically weaker because of the war.

The fist has written on each finger those countries who fought against Germany in World War I; British Empire, France, America, Italy, and Japan. It is shown that the man whose fist belongs to is wearing a suit. This emphasizes the formality of the treaty and the use the of diplomacy.

Japan is named in the fist because of its contribution with Great Britain. The operation Second Special Squadron had to mission “to escort British ships traveling between Marseille, France, and Malta; Taranto, Italy, and Malta; and Alexandria, Egypt, and Malta to protect them from German submarines.”⁹

Germany’s mouth is wide open as he is forcefully being spoon feed a big pill with the word “Peace Terms” written on it. Germany opening his mouth so wide shows, that even though they are being forced, Germany will corroborate with the imposed terms. The pill is bigger than the mouth of Germany, emphasizing how Germany does not have the resources to be able to comply with both economic and territorial demands of the treaty.

David Lloyd George, Vittorio Orlando, Georges Clemenceau, and Woodrow Wilson are the ones spoon feeding Germany. As they do they all say “You’ve got to swallow it whether you like it or not!” This sentence highlights that Germany was forced to accept the terms and signed the treaty, knowing well that they could not comply with the sanctions imposed.

Wilson at the end of the spoon, holding the most of the spoon, and being depicted as the tallest, shows how he had the most control over the treaty and is the most powerful. Lloyd, Orlando, and Clemenceau are standing on top of a pill case that says “Big Four Pills” and “worth millions.” Those phrases represent how these four people were in charge of the treaty, were on the winning side, and that the economic sanctions on Germany equate to millions of dollars in both reparations and territory loss.

The cartoon expresses Germany in a vulnerable condition, illustrates the power and dominance of the allies, highlights the harsh punishing conditions imposed on Germany, and the unfair, unreasonable, disrespect, and abuse by the other countries. The impact of the document

was to secure the British. Germany was depicted very weak, so the British people would not see it as a war threat.. In addition, the document being published on a newspaper allowed it to reach massive amounts people, furthering the communication of the political situation of Europe. Also, the British people felt empowered by seeing Lloyd completely dominating Germany. It sparked sentiments amongst Great Britain that Germany was punished and that Great Britain is a superior power.¹⁰

Cartoon B was published by *The Brooklyn Citizen* in *Review of Reviews*, Vol. 59, No. 6 on February 1919 in Brookline, NY. It was created by George M. Adams and titled “Can he produce the Harmony?”¹¹ The cartoon focuses on Wilson’s Fourteen Point plan and his goal to create European peace. Adams uses the metaphor of an orchestra and it’s conductor as Wilson to highlight his role at The Paris Peace Conference.

The title of this cartoon extends the metaphor. Adams uses a double entendre with the word harmony. He uses harmony as a way to extend his metaphor of the orchestra but also as a synonym of peace. In his title, he questions if Wilson will be successful in creating and preserving peace in Europe with the Fourteen Point Plan. Wilson is at the center of the piece, he is smiling, and is drawn with detail.

Wilson is conducting an orchestra following a music sheet that says “World Peace Symphony.” The song title is a direct reference to the Treaty of Versailles, emphasizing that if all the countries follow the fourteen points, then there will be world peace. The orchestra is composed by European countries, China, and Japan. The states of Germany and Austria-Hungary are missing. The lack of Germany illustrates how the treaty was made against them, without taking their voice into account. On the Bottom of the orchestra it says “All Nations,” which

refers to all the nations that allied against Germany. France, Italy, and England are the most upfront musicians, showing how they were Wilson's main supporters during the conference. All the countries are depicted with happiness and enjoyment.

China has a racist depiction. An obvious ethnically Chinese man is situated on the far right corner of the orchestra, standing up, and playing the discs. This is to represent China's role in World War I. "China began shipping out thousands of men to Britain, France and Russia. Those laborers would repair tanks, assemble shells, transport supplies and munitions, and help to literally reshape the war's battle sites."¹² "By the end of the war, Chinese workers would rank as the largest and longest-serving non-European contingent in World War I."¹³ The racist cartoon highlights that the Chinese were sent to war to the 'dirty' job that the allies soldiers did not want to do. They were seen as lesser than the west.

Contrastingly, Japan is represented as part of the orchestra, without any ethnic distinctions or placement isolations. Making Japan equal to Europe. Interestingly, the cartoon also depicts Yugoslavians. By depicting the ethnic people from Yugoslavia, Adams highlights national sovereignty, which gets underlooked at in the incidents that led to World War I.¹⁴

The impact of Adams cartoon shows the extent of Wilson's power over European affairs, and European countries willingly letting him take command. Wilson is represented as an influential hero. It credits Wilson for being able to restore the peace in Europe, however, due to the title it shows Adams' skepticism in whether the fourteen points will be the everlasting successful solution. Equal to cartoon A, cartoon B was also published on a newspaper, reaching massive audiences. It created nationalism in America, increasing the pride due to the smarts and

success of their president. The United States takes advantage of the economical decay, lack of organization, and politically fragile Europe to strengthen their own agenda.

Cartoon A depicts the war guilt clause as harsh on Germany, with the purpose to assure the allies that Germany would not be a threat again. The harsh conditions worsen the situation. Germany was humiliated and desperate causing the Weimar republic to fail 1920-1930 and for Hitler to become chancellor in 1932.

Cartoon B depicts Wilson's deep involvement. Wilson demanded war reparations for the loans given to make the United States economically strong. Unfortunately those loans were the cause of the Great Depression. ““There can be little doubt that the deepest roots of the crisis lay in the several chronic infirmities that World War I had inflicted on the international political and economic order,” wrote historian David M. Kennedy.”¹⁵

The Treaty of Versailles sparked tensions across Europe in 1919. Political cartoons inform the public about the political situation of the world, and help the people formulate a position on the issue. The political cartoons “Der Tag!” and “Can He Produce The Harmony” have contrasting, yet accurate, opinions on the Paris Peace Conference. Cartoon A shows the punishment of Germany, the allies strength, and secures the British. Versus cartoon B, which shows how European countries, with and exception of Germany, China, and Japan are happy with the outcome of the conference. In addition to showing Wilson as a influential hero in European affairs and sparks nationalism in the United States. The political cartoons show different aspects of the Treaty of Versailles, it's creation, and the impact that it had across Europe.

Appendix

A



A cartoon that appeared in a British newspaper in 1919

B



© George Matthew Adams

CAN HE PRODUCE THE HARMONY?
From the *Citizen* (Brooklyn, N. Y.)

Endnotes

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