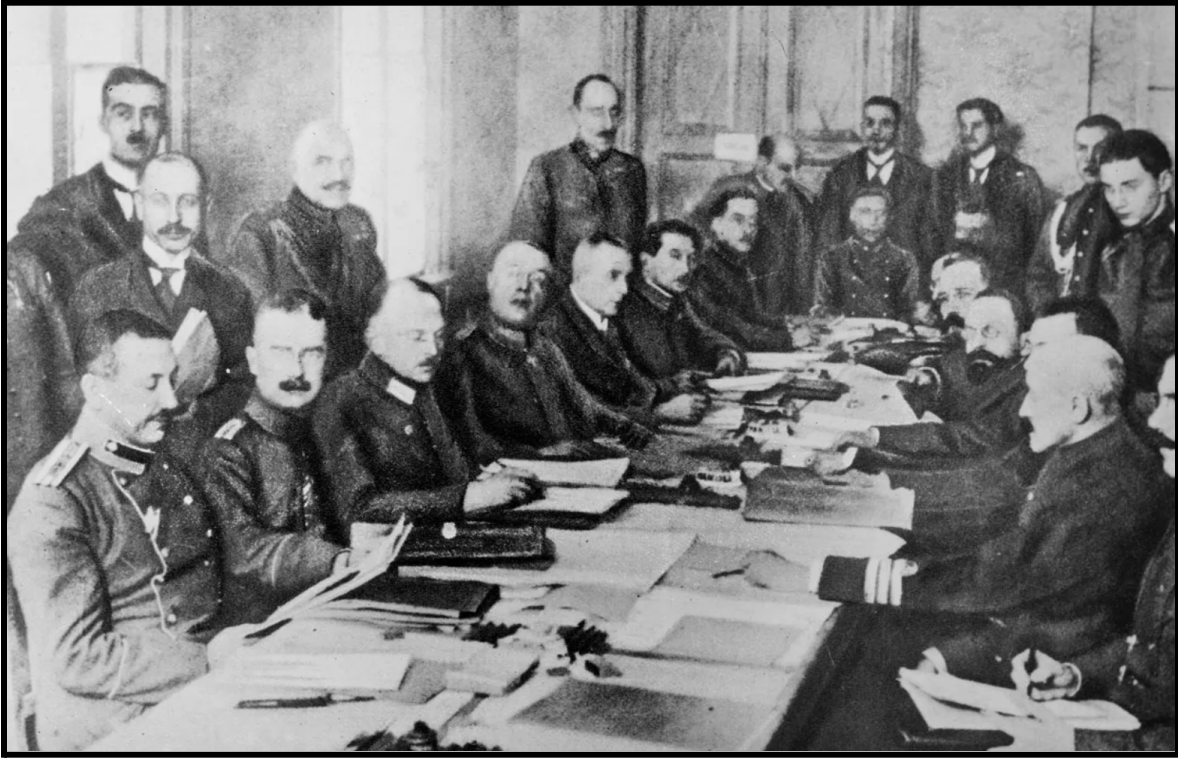


The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk



Palos Verdes Peninsula High School Model United Nations

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Topic Background

World War I

From 1914 to 1918, most of the nations of Europe, along with the Russian Empire, the United States, the Ottoman Empire, and other regions were at war. The war saw the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria) against the Allies or Entente Powers (mainly France, Great Britain, Russia, Italy, Japan, and in 1917, the United States). The war ended with the defeat of the Central Powers and the destruction of four great Empires (Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Ottoman).¹

The causes of the war were a result of decades of conflict in Europe and many different intranational and imperial issues spilling over around the same time, combined with a web of alliances and treaties between European states. Tensions grew between Austria-Hungary and Serbia when Serbian nationalists attempted to unite all Slavic peoples living in the Balkan region into a single state, including South Slavs of Austria-Hungary, attempting to infringe on their territory. The assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, ruler of the Austro-Hungarian Empire by Serbian nationalists on June 28, 1914, suddenly ignited rivalries and stoked tensions in the continent.²

Austria-Hungary used the assassination as a reason to settle its dispute with Serbia. In anticipation of Russia's support of Serbia, Austria-Hungary gained support from Germany before presenting an ultimatum to Serbia, demanding they comply or face a declaration of war. Serbia accepted many of Austria-Hungary's demands but wanted to further negotiate others. Convinced that Austria-Hungary was ready for war, Serbia appealed to the Russian Empire for military support. Germany demanded that Russia and France not become involved in the conflict, and when they refused, Germany declared war on both France and Russia. The German invasion of Belgium days later brought Great Britain into the war to defend their ally. Austria-Hungary declared war against Russia on August 5; Serbia against Germany on August 6; Montenegro against Austria-Hungary on August 7 and against Germany on August 12; France and Great Britain against Austria-Hungary on August 10 and on August 12, respectively; Japan against Germany on August 23; Austria-Hungary against Japan on August 25 and against Belgium on August 28.³

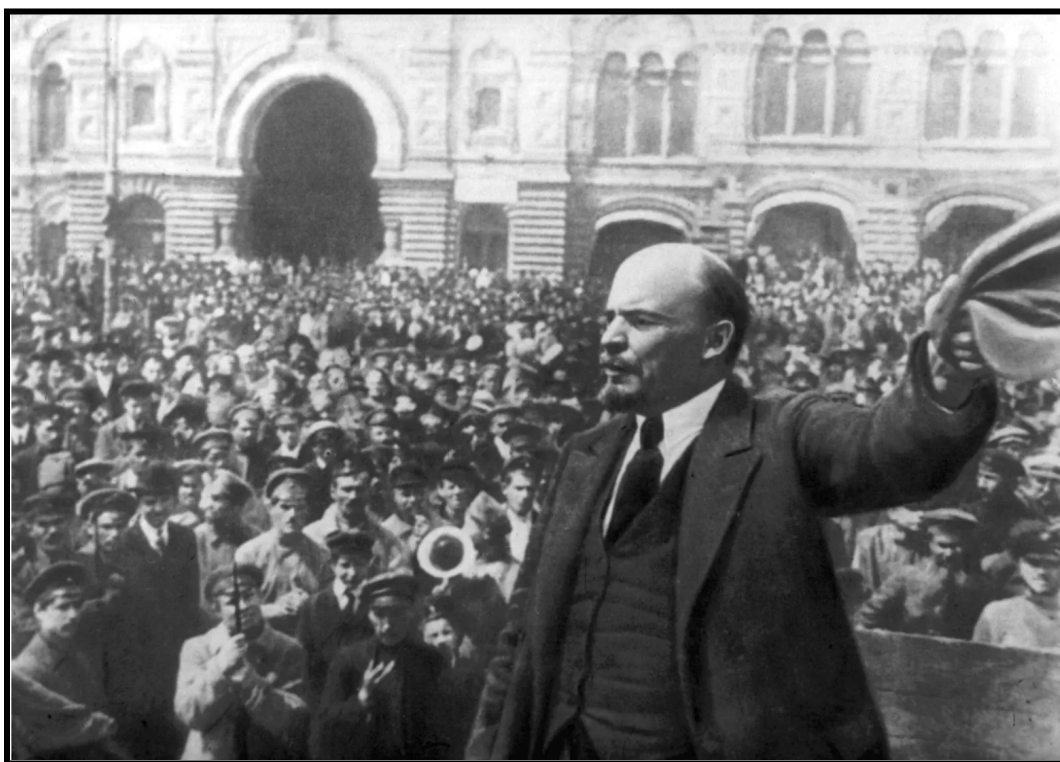
The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

¹ "World War I," Encyclopædia Britannica, October 1, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

After the Bolsheviks seized power from the czar in the Russian Revolution of 1917, the country was still engaged in the war with England, France and the United States fighting against the Central Powers. The Russian army had fallen into disarray and was significantly weakened against the successful Germans who had pushed far into the country and now occupied what is now Poland and Lithuania, which was part of the Russian Empire at the time. The number one priority for the new Bolshevik government was to get out of the war as quickly as possible. A truce was agreed to, to be followed by a peace conference to discuss terms and formalize the deal. Vladimir Lenin, head of the Russian government, was more concerned with putting down internal opposition to the new government than with fighting the Germans in what had so far been a war with little gain for Russia.⁴



Held in the town of Brest-Litovsk in then-Poland, the conference opened in December of 1917. Leon Trotsky, the Russian foreign minister, led the Russian delegation. The German and Austrian delegations were headed by their foreign secretaries, Richard von Kühlmann and Ottakar Czernin, including influential German General Max Hoffman, Chief of Staff of the German armies on the Eastern front, and Talat Pasha of the Ottoman Empire. Trotsky planned to draw out the negotiations in the hope of a Communist revolution in Germany and Austria which would end the war and allow the conference to end on favorable terms for Russia, but no revolution occurred, and in February, Trotsky announced that the policy of the new Russian

⁴ "Treaties of Brest-Litovsk," History.com, accessed October 3, 2023, <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/treaties-of-brest-litovsk>.

government was “neither war nor peace.” This would mean that Russia would not resume fighting the Central Powers, but would also not agree to give up territory or pay monetary reparations to them. The Central Powers in response ended the truce, and resumed their invasion of Russia.⁵

The resumption of hostilities concerned Lenin, who ordered Trotsky to accept the terms of the proposed treaty. Trotsky was worried that the conditions of the Treaty demanded by the Central Powers would weaken the new Russian government and continue to ravage the Russian economy after the Revolution. Russia gave up Poland and the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to Germany and Austria-Hungary; and ceded Kars, Ardahan and Batum to Turkey. Ukraine, Finland, Estonia and the rest of Latvia were transformed into independent states under German protection. Bessarabia was to go to Romania and the Ottomans took the Armenian areas in the Caucasus. All Bolshevik propaganda in the ceded areas was to cease. Russia lost huge areas of prime agricultural land, eighty percent of its coal mines, and half of other industries. A follow-up agreement in August committed Russia to pay six billion marks in reparations. The total losses constituted some 1 million square miles of Russia’s former territory; a third of its population, around 55 million people; a majority of its coal, oil and iron stores; and much of its industry. Lenin bitterly called the settlement “that abyss of defeat, dismemberment, enslavement and humiliation.”⁶

The Allied Powers won the war later in the year and the treaty was repealed, which saved Russia from some of the worst consequences, though Poland, the Baltic states and Finland were not recovered in the settlement of World War I.

Subtopics to Consider

Subtopic 1: The Russian Revolution

In the early 1900s, Russia was one of the poorest countries in Europe with a majority peasant population and a growing number of industrial workers. Western Europe viewed Russia as undeveloped, and subsequently did not engage in the type of relations that they practiced amongst themselves. A population boom at the end of the 19th century, coupled with a bad harvest season due to Russia’s climate, and a series of costly wars, primarily the Crimean War, caused frequent food shortages across the Russian Empire. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 further weakened Russia with its loss in the war, crippling the political position of Russian ruler Czar Nicholas II. Russia suffered heavy losses of soldiers, ships, money, and international prestige.⁷

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Russian Revolution,” Encyclopædia Britannica, August 11, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/russian-revolution>.

The educated class in Russia saw the social progress and advancement in Western Europe and North America and began to organize against the monarchical rule of the czars and the Russian aristocratic class. Eventually, this led to protests by Russian workers against the monarchy, which led to the Bloody Sunday massacre of 1905, where many unarmed protesters were killed or wounded by the Czar's troops. The Bloody Sunday massacre, in turn, led to the Russian Revolution of 1905, where workers responded with a series of labor strikes throughout the country, joined by agricultural laborers and soldiers, leading to the creation of worker-dominated councils called "soviets."⁸

Amidst the unrest and detraction from czarist rule, Russia entered into World War I in August 1914 in support of the Serbs and their French and British allies. Their involvement in the war was controversial among the anti-monarchist population, who saw it as harmful to an already weak Russia. Militarily, Russia was weaker than the more industrialized Germany, and Russian casualties were greater than those sustained by any nation in any previous war. Food and fuel shortages throughout Russia as a result of the war and economic inflation weakened the economy even further. This led to even more protests, and on March 11, 1917, the troops of the Czarist government attacked the protestors, furthering the resolve of the anti-monarchists to continue calling for the dissolution of the czarist rule. The Duma, the legislative body of Russia, formed a provisional government on March 12, and a few days later, Czar Nicholas II abdicated the throne, ending centuries of Russian rule by the Romanov bloodline and the czars.⁹



The new Russian government continued the Russian war effort, even though the country's involvement in World War I was enormously unpopular amongst the people. This

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

further exacerbated Russia's food supply problems, leading to unrest which continued to grow as peasants looted farms and food riots erupted in the cities. On November 6 and 7 of 1917, leftist revolutionaries, led by Bolshevik Party leader Vladimir Lenin, launched a nearly bloodless coup d'état against the Duma's provisional government. After the coup and the ousting of the provisional government, Lenin called for a Soviet government that would be ruled directly by councils of soldiers, peasants and workers, in the style of the workers committees that had been established prior.¹⁰

The establishment of a communist Russia under Vladimir Lenin and the Bolshevik revolutionaries did not sit well with those that opposed the Bolsheviks and their new political and economic agenda for Russia. Civil war broke out in Russia in late 1917, primarily between the "Red" and "White" Armies. The Red Army fought for the Bolshevik government under Lenin to protect the communist state it was in the process of building. The White Army was composed of many of the Bolshevik's enemies, who were loosely united against the continued transformation into a communist system, and included monarchists still loyal to the Czar, the Romanov family, capitalists wishing to protect their businesses and wealth, and supporters of democratic socialism who supported some of the Bolshevik's policies but did not align with them completely after having been forced out of their position in the Duma when it was dissolved.¹¹

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk had a role in provoking the civil war between the Whites and the Reds. So did the fact that the Left Socialist Revolutionaries withdrew from the government and left it entirely in the hands of the Bolsheviks, and some of them took the White side in the civil war. The Russian Civil War ended in 1923 with Lenin's Red Army claiming victory and establishing the Soviet Union. After many years of violence and political unrest that saw little foreign involvement due to the distraction of World War I, the Russian Revolution paved the way for the rise of communism as an influential political belief system around the world, and set the stage for the rise of the Soviet Union as a world power.¹²

Lenin's highest priority was ending the war with the Central Powers, because he feared that Russian soldiers, eager to return home to share in the distribution of looted land, would topple his regime if it continued the war. He also believed that a truce on the Eastern Front would spark mutinies and strikes in the West, making it possible for the Bolsheviks to take power there. Immediately upon assuming office, Lenin and the Bolshevik government proposed an end to the fighting. The Germans and Austrians agreed to the proposal, and held negotiations at Brest-Litovsk. It was vital to the success of the Russian Revolution and to the Bolsheviks maintaining power. It was crucial that the new Russian government stabilize its relations with the

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Treaties of Brest-Litovsk," History.com, accessed October 3, 2023, <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/treaties-of-brest-litovsk>.

warring parties as soon as possible and free up its resources to attend to domestic matters, or risk counter-revolutionary forces seizing power.¹³

Subtopic 2: Effects of the Treaty on The War

Per the terms of the Treaty, Bolshevik Russia ceded the Baltic States to the German Empire, which were meant to become German vassal states under German princelings. Russia ceded its province of Kars Oblast in the South Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire and recognized the independence of Ukraine. Russia also agreed to pay six billion German gold marks in reparations to Germany, but this never came to pass. With the adoption of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Entente Powers no longer existed. Despite the appearance of a German success at the outcome of the Treaty, the manpower and resources required for the Germans to meaningfully occupy the former Russian territory that they gained may have contributed to the failure of the Central Powers Spring Offensive and gained them relatively little supplies or other materials for the Central Powers war effort. The Allied powers led a small-scale invasion of Russia, partly to stop Germany from exploiting Russian resources, and to a lesser extent, to support the “Whites” (as opposed to the “Reds”) in the Russian Civil War. Allied troops landed in Arkhangelsk and in Vladivostok as part of the North Russia Intervention, where they supported the coalition of the White Army in hopes of preventing further communist uprisings across Europe.¹⁴



The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk did not have a lasting effect, and was voided eight months later. Germany withdrew from the Treaty and broke diplomatic relations with Bolshevik Russia

¹³ “Russian Revolution,” Encyclopædia Britannica, August 11, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/russian-revolution>.

¹⁴ Kennedy Hickman, World War I and The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, February 5, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/treaty-of-brest-litovsk-2361093>.

on November 5. The Ottoman Empire broke the treaty after two months by invading the newly created First Republic of Armenia in May 1918. In the Armistice of November 11, 1918, the peace agreement that ended World War I, one of the first conditions was the complete repeal of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. One year after the armistice, and end of the war, the German Army withdrew its occupying forces from the lands it had gained in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, leaving behind a power vacuum. In the later Treaty of Rapallo of 1922, Germany accepted the Treaty's nullification, and agreed to abandon all war-related territorial and financial claims against Russia, and vice versa.¹⁵

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk diminished the amount of land that the Bolsheviks could lay claim to. The loss of Ukraine and the Baltic states created spaces of anti-Bolshevik military activity in the Russian Civil War that followed the Bolshevik Revolution. Russian nationalists, and some who had supported the Bolshevik revolutionaries, were furious that the Bolsheviks accepted the terrible terms of the Treaty and fought to oppose them, especially as the White Army grew. Non-Russians who inhabited the lands lost by Bolshevik Russia in the Treaty saw the changes as an opportunity to set up independent states not under Bolshevik rule. Immediately after the signing of the Treaty, Lenin moved the Bolshevik Russian government from Petrograd to Moscow.¹⁶

The Allies felt there would be significant challenges to come from the loss of Russia holding the Eastern front of the war, leading Great Britain and the United States to attempt to get the Russians involved in the war again, and force the Germans to fight a two-front war. The United States and Great Britain sent troops into Russia to help the White Army against the Bolsheviks and their Red Army, hoping that the White Army would be victorious, and that the Russian government would then void the Treaty and bring Russia back into the fight. American and British soldiers were in Russia until 1920, but were unsuccessful in stopping the Red Army from winning the civil war.¹⁷

The Germans were able to use the outcome of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk to stay in the war and protect their gains on the Eastern front, which enabled Germany to launch a powerful offensive on the Western front against the Allied forces after their resources and manpower were freed up and quickly moved to the Western front to counter Allied gains. This rapid redeployment and unexpected offensive gave the Central Powers the momentum needed to continue fighting the war. This offensive proved disastrous to the Allied forces, making significant territorial gains that they had been unable to secure for years. American soldiers arrived in Europe just in time to repel this advance, which came within a few miles of overrunning Paris as the German forces nearly overwhelmed French and British defensive positions. The loss of Russian support for the war effort made the Central Powers, particularly

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

the German Imperial Army, able to reallocate resources more effectively to counter the Allies, costing them significant manpower and territory that they had won through hard fighting in previous years. This delay to an Allied victory prolonged the war and forced the United States to contribute more troops to the war effort.¹⁸

Subtopic 3: Territorial Concessions

Russia ceded Poland and the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to Germany and Austria-Hungary, ceded Kars, Ardahan and Batum to Turkey, and Ukraine, Finland, Estonia and the rest of Latvia were transformed into independent states under German protection. This caused geopolitical issues for decades after the Treaty. Ukraine and Belarus, both of which were to be liberated as countries independent from the Austro-Hungarian Empire or Germany, were not aware that this liberation would mean economic or military dependence on their Western neighbors, but that is exactly what Germany intended in the terms of the Treaty, hoping to create what would essentially function as tributary states in the German sphere of influence and give them a foothold in Eastern Europe.¹⁹



What seemed like a good investment into the strength of the German Empire, however, ended up being the opposite. Germany insisted on and received its demands in the Treaty, and

¹⁸ Patrick Allitt, "How Did the First World War End?," Wondrium Daily, May 11, 2023, <https://www.wondriumdaily.com/how-did-the-first-world-war-end/>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

then found itself forced to garrison its new territories with nearly a million soldiers, overstretching its military and potentially robbing itself of the means by which to force a conclusion to the war before substantial numbers of Americans could arrive, effectively dooming the Central Powers. Although the Bolsheviks had reluctantly agreed to terms that were widely viewed as humiliating, and were no longer in open conflict with Germany, that did not stop local Bolsheviks from attempting to radicalize Germany's soldiers in the hopes that their concessions in the Treaty would be ineffective in the event of a communist revolution breaking out amongst the ranks of German soldiers, part of the reason that the Russians agreed to the terms in the first place. Furthermore, ethnic nationalists in Ukraine and Belarus felt that they had been misled, and began small-scale insurgencies against the German forces. What had seemed originally like a good outcome to the German war effort quickly turned into a cultural and logistical challenge for the Germans.²⁰

While the immediate effects of Brest-Litovsk were changing the borders and legal status of these countries, it also established a legal precedent for Eastern Europe to exist independent of Russia and its territorial ownership. It based that precedent and justification in the ethnic, historical, and linguistic identity of the people inhabiting those places. Although "Ukrainian" and "Belarusian" culture were recognized before the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, those things had not been viewed as sufficient for self-sustaining cultures, a factor that created exceptional challenges for Russia and Germany in their attempts to regain those territories and exert control over them directly and indirectly, weakening the Bolshevik government and the Red Army, as well as the German Empire and its allocation of resources to hold these territories. Germany facilitated the breaking of the long standing practice of subjugating Eastern European peoples and states, subsuming them into larger nations, an effect that saw the same criteria applied to Germany and Austria-Hungary after their defeat in the war, and both countries were partitioned to create smaller nations that would be less capable of waging war on that scale again.²¹

Possible Solutions

Though in a weak position, the Bolsheviks stated that they desired "peace without annexations or indemnities," meaning an end to the fighting without loss of land or reparations. Seeking out a situation that would fit this desire would greatly benefit the Russians, but would leave the Germans with little gain. The Germans, whose troops occupied large swaths of Russian territory, demanded independence for Poland and Lithuania, conflicting with Bolshevik demands. Believing that the Germans were eager to conclude a peace treaty to free troops for use on the Western Front before the Americans could arrive in large numbers, the Russian delegation stalled the talks, hoping that a moderate peace could be achieved in which the Russians lost less

²⁰ Kennedy Hickman, World War I and The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, February 5, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/treaty-of-brest-litovsk-2361093>.

²¹ Ibid.

than the Germans wanted them to. The Germans and the Central Powers needed an end to a two front war quickly if they were to move on the Western front effectively before the Americans arrived to reinforce them. The Germans may have been able to effectively win in Europe if they had concluded the war on the Eastern front earlier, but would likely have sacrificed some of the territorial and financial gains they made in the final outcome of the Treaty.²²



The Russians also hoped that the Bolshevik Revolution would spread to Germany, and end the negotiations as the German government would fall to a Bolshevik one, negating the need to conclude a Treaty. These tactics only angered the Germans and Austro-Hungarians, who imposed harsher terms. Unwilling to sign harsh peace terms and not believing that they could delay further, the Russians withdrew the Bolshevik delegation. Had they stayed longer or settled earlier, more favorable terms may have been worked out.

Reacting to Russia's breaking off of talks, the German, Austrian, Ottoman, and Bulgarian troops began advancing back into Russian territory in violation of the agreed upon truce. The Bolshevik government decided to accept the German terms, but the Germans introduced harsher terms which briefly made Lenin debate continuing the fight. Had the Russians returned to battle,

²² Ibid.

they would likely have been forced to unconditionally surrender, or potentially seen the Bolshevik government collapse.²³

²³ Ibid.

Questions to Consider

1. Who is the aggressor in the war, and should the aggressor be responsible for making greater amends?
2. How will any territorial or financial concessions affect the state of the war?
3. Does the new Russian government owe any allegiance or consideration to the agreements made with the Allies by the Czarist government?
4. When should the provisions of the Treaty take effect, and how will each side fulfill them?
5. Will the outcome of the Treaty hinder the new Russian government or the Central Powers?
6. How will any ceded territory be governed, and who will the people living there owe allegiance to?
7. Will any aspects of the Treaty be impacted by the outcome of the war?
8. Will the former Russian Imperial territories outside of Russia proper be given a say in their involvement in the war, and should they still be considered under Russian control now that the Empire has collapsed?

Further Reading

1. [World War I \(Brittanica\)](#)
2. [Russian Revolution \(Brittanica\)](#)
3. [Treaties of Brest-Litvosk \(Brittanica\)](#)