

CHAPTER
13

Section 4

PRIMARY SOURCE **Signing the Treaty of Versailles**
by Harold Nicolson

The Treaty of Versailles, a 200-page peace treaty between Germany and the Allied powers, was signed on June 28, 1919, in the Great Hall of Mirrors at the French palace of Versailles. Harold Nicolson (1886–1968), a British diplomat and writer, observed the proceedings. As you read this passage from Nicolson’s eyewitness account, think about his impressions of the treaty signing.

We enter the Galerie des Glaces. . . . In the middle there is a horseshoe table for the plenipotentiaries [diplomatic agents]. In front of that, like a guillotine, is the table for the signatures. . . . There must be seats for over a thousand persons. This robs the ceremony of all privilege and therefore of all dignity. . . .

People step over the Aubusson benches and escabeaux [stools] to talk to friends. Meanwhile the delegates arrive in little bunches and push up the central aisle slowly. . . . The table is at last full. Clemenceau glances to right and left. . . . Clemenceau makes a sign to the ushers. They say ‘Ssh! Ssh! Ssh!’ . . . The officials of the Protocol of the Foreign Office move up the aisle and say, ‘Ssh! Ssh!’ again. There is then an absolute hush, followed by a sharp military order. The Gardes Républicains at the doorway flash their swords into their scabbards with a loud click. ‘Faîtes entrer les Allemands [Let the Germans come in],’ says Clemenceau in the ensuing silence. His voice is distant but harshly penetrating. A hush follows.

Through the door at the end appear two huissiers [ushers] with silver chains. They march in single file. After them come four officers of France, Great Britain, America, and Italy. And then, isolated and pitiable, come the two German delegates. Dr Müller, Dr Bell. The silence is terrifying. Their feet upon a strip of parquet between the savonnerie carpets echo hollow and duplicate. They keep their eyes fixed away from those two thousand staring eyes, fixed upon the ceiling. They are deathly pale. They do not appear as representatives of a brutal militarism. . . .

They are conducted to their chairs. Clemenceau at once breaks the silence. ‘Messieurs,’ he rasps, ‘la séance est ouverte [Gentlemen, the meeting is open].’ He adds a few ill-chosen words. ‘We are here to sign a Treaty of Peace.’ . . . Then St. Quentin

advances towards the Germans and with the utmost dignity leads them to the little table on which the Treaty is expanded. There is general tension. They sign. There is a general relaxation. Conversation hums again in an undertone. The delegates stand up one by one and pass onwards to the queue [line] which waits by the signature table. Meanwhile people buzz round the main table getting autographs. . . .

Suddenly from outside comes the crash of guns thundering a salute. It announces to Paris that the second Treaty of Versailles has been signed by Dr Müller and Dr Bell. . . .

We had been warned it [the signing] might last three hours. Yet almost at once it seemed that the queue was getting thin. . . . The huissiers began again their ‘Ssh! Ssh!’ cutting suddenly short the wide murmur which had again begun. There was a final hush. ‘La séance est levée [The meeting is closed],’ rasped Clemenceau. Not a word more or less.

We kept our seats while the Germans were conducted like prisoners from the dock, their eyes still fixed upon some distant point of the horizon.

from Harold Nicholson, *Peacemaking, 1919* (Constable, 1933). Reprinted in John Carey, ed., *EyeWitness to History* (New York: Avon, 1987), 490–492.

Discussion Questions

1. **Clarifying** Who opened and closed the meeting to sign the peace treaty?
2. **Summarizing** What words or phrases would you use to describe the mood at the signing according to Nicolson’s account?
3. **Using Visual Stimuli** Compare Nicolson’s written account with the visual representation in the painting on page 741 of your textbook. What are some of the similarities? What are some of the differences?