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28 June: Signing of the Versailles Peace Treaty

Although the German armies are still fighting in Feindesland (enemy territory) on all fronts, by the autumn of 1918, from the multiple standpoints of tactics, strategy, staffing and morale, they are no longer in a position to continue fighting after four years of war. As a result, the German OHL (Supreme Army Command) asks the government to begin armistice negotiations. The two chief military leaders in Supreme Army Command, General Field Marshall Paul von Hindenburg and the Quartermaster General Erich Ludendorff, have waged the war since 1916 with the greatest vigour and almost dictatorial powers. The German Army's hopeless plight by October 1918 cannot be laid solely at their feet, but it is certainly the result of their strategic mistakes and unreasonable lack of insight. At the point of time when defeat is clearly no longer avoidable, however, they shift the responsibility to the imperial government. It appears that even though the military leaders have lost the war, the civilian government representatives are to shoulder the burden of responsibility.



Two days after the overthrow of Emperor Wilhelm II and the proclamation of the republic, a representative each from the Army and Navy and, in particular, the Secretary of State from the Catholic Centre Party, Matthias Erzberger, and the diplomat Count Alfred von Oberndorff, sign the armistice in a railway carriage near Compiègne on 11 November 1918. The Chancellor, Friedrich Ebert (SPD), and Hindenburg had ordered the German representatives in the negotiations to sign the armistice under any circumstances and accepting all conditions. The concern was too great that allied soldiers, including around one million American GIs, could and would invade German territory if negotiations were to falter or break down. In Germany, the sense of dismay and horror at the armistice is immense. It can certainly be said that soldiers and officers at the front no longer had any illusions as to the state of the war, but on the home front, by contrast, the press and government kept hopes alive that there might yet be a victorious conclusion to the war. Reactions around the empire correspond to these divergent beliefs. Many Germans can only justify the defeat, which came completely unexpectedly and suddenly from their perspective, as being the result of betrayal. They blame the new civilian and republican government. For some, a plausible explanation for the turn in events appears in the form of an alleged jüdische Verschwörung (Jewish conspiracy). Hindenburg and Ludendorff's refusal to accept personal responsibility for the end of the war leads to the emergence of the so-called stab-in-the-back myth in the young German republic, myth that will weigh heavily on the democracy through until late 1933, and that de-legitimise the republic in the



eyes of many citizens. Supporters of the stab-in-the-back myth believe that the
im Felde unbesiegten Heere (German army undefeated in the field) was stabbed
in the back with a dagger from their homeland. In this way a form of right-wing
extremism is able to develop that sets itself irreconcilably on a confrontation
course with the democratic state, which will ultimately topple the Weimar
Republic.



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Carrying these heavy burdens, the new and still provisional government is
required to conduct peace negotiations with the victorious powers of France, Italy,
England and the USA from January 1919 in Versailles. In addition to these
victorious powers, a further 28 states have representatives at the peace talks,
some of which had only declared war on the empire shortly before the armistice,
thus securing themselves a share of the victory, for example, Peru and Guatemala.
Soviet Russia is not present at the negotiating table. Under constant threat of an
invasion of the empire, and with an ongoing English sea blockade that continues
to cost many human lives, members of the German peace delegation have little
room to manoeuvre, and little ability to pursue their own ideas or to stave off the
other side's demands. Powerlessly, the leading German negotiators simply have to
accept everything presented to them. Even though there are considerable
discrepancies within the victorious powers regarding the demands to be made of
the German Empire, an agreement is ultimately reached regarding the core
points, which are laid out in detail in 440 articles;

- the Empire must cede territories to France (Alsace and Lorraine) and to the re-established state of Poland (West Prussia and Poznan), and in border regions with mixed ethnic populations (North Schleswig, Eupen-Malmedy, the Hlučín Region in Czech Silesia, Upper Silesia), referendums will decide the national affiliation. The harbour cities of Gdańsk and the Saar region will be placed under international control;
- the German Army is to be massively reduced and is only allowed to be located in particular regions of the empire;
- German rivers and canals are to be internationalised;
- the German Empire loses its colonies;
- very high reparation claims are imposed on the German Empire, amounts which can only be paid with great difficulty;
- Article 231 assigns sole responsibility for the outbreak of the world war to the German Empire.

In an ignominious ceremony, the German delegation is required to sign the Versailles Peace Treaty. Shortly beforehand, the Reichstag parliament had agreed to the treaty following heated debate and under a massive renewed threat of an allied invasion. Formalities take place in the Hall of Mirrors in the French Palace of Versailles, the same place where the Second German Empire had been declared in

January 1871. Article 231, however, causes the greatest embitterment in Germany.

The positive response from the Germans that Adolf Hitler received during his rise to power had only little to do with his anti-Semitism. Hitler's anti-Semitism was indeed an ideological component of his Bewegung (movement), but it was not yet really taken seriously by many Germans. In addition to Hitler's promise to tackle the high rate of unemployment in Germany, the principal motivation behind many Germans voting for the Nazi Party was his open battle with and challenges to the Schandvertrag von Versailles (Versailles Treaty of Disgrace). Germans from all political spheres and all social levels rejected the dictates from the victorious powers. Hitler's successful revision of broad sections of the Treaty of Versailles in the years between 1933 and 1939 (regarding rearmament, occupation of the Rhine region, and return of the Saar region) were sufficient to ensure him a very high rate of approval, even among Germans who had previously rejected the dictator. Whether a more far-sighted and milder approach from the victorious powers in Versailles, as some contemporaries requested at the time, might have spared humanity from Nazism must remain a matter for speculation.

Translated by Heather Rae, proofread by Maria-Philippa Wieckowski



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