

Treaty of Versailles: Opposing Arguments

Document 1: Leader of the German Peace Delegation Count von Brockdorff-Rantzau's Letter to Paris Peace Conference President Georges Clemenceau on the Subject of Peace Terms, May 1919 [Count von Brockdorff-Rantzau was first foreign minister to German's new Weimar Republic. He resigned over the signing of the treaty.]

Mr. President:

I have the honor to transmit to you herewith the observations of the German delegation on the draft treaty of peace.

We came to Versailles in the expectation of receiving a peace proposal based on the agreed principles. We were firmly resolved to do everything in our power with a view of fulfilling the grave obligations which we had undertaken. We hoped for the peace of justice which had been promised to us.

We were aghast when we read in documents the demands made upon us, the victorious violence of our enemies. The more deeply we penetrate into the spirit of this treaty, the more convinced we become of the impossibility of carrying it out. The exactions of this treaty are more than the German people can bear.

With a view to the re-establishment of the Polish State we must renounce indisputably German territory - nearly the whole of the Province of West Prussia, which is preponderantly German; of Pomerania; Danzig, which is German to the core; we must let that ancient Hanse town be transformed into a free State under Polish suzerainty.

We must agree that East Prussia shall be amputated from the body of the State, condemned to a lingering death, and robbed of its northern portion, including Memel, which is purely German...

The purely German district of the Saar must be detached from our empire, and the way must be paved for its subsequent annexation to France, although we owe her debts in coal only, not in men.

For fifteen years Rhenish territory must be occupied, and after those fifteen years the Allies have power to refuse the restoration of the country; in the interval the Allies can take every measure to sever the economic and moral links with the mother country, and finally to misrepresent the wishes of the indigenous population.

Although the exaction of the cost of the war has been expressly renounced, yet Germany, thus cut in pieces and weakened, must declare herself ready in principle to bear all the war expenses of her enemies, which would exceed many times over the total amount of German State and private assets.

Meanwhile her enemies demand, in excess of the agreed conditions, reparation for damage suffered by their civil population, and in this connection Germany must also go bail for her allies. The sum to be paid is to be fixed by our enemies unilaterally, and to admit of subsequent modification and increase. No limit is fixed, save the capacity of the German people for payment, determined not by their standard of life, but solely by their capacity to meet the demands of their enemies by their labour. The German people would thus be condemned to perpetual slave labour.

In spite of the exorbitant demands, the reconstruction of our economic life is at the same time rendered impossible. We must surrender our merchant fleet. We are to renounce all foreign securities. We are to hand over to our enemies our property in all German enterprises abroad, even in the countries of our allies.

Even after the conclusion of peace the enemy States are to have the right of confiscating all German property. No German trader in their countries will be protected from these war measures. We must completely renounce our colonies, and not even German missionaries shall have the right to follow their calling therein...

The German people are excluded from the League of Nations, to which is entrusted all work of common interest to the world.

Thus must a whole people sign the decree for its proscription, nay, its own death sentence.

Germany knows that she must make sacrifices in order to attain peace. Germany knows that she has, by agreement, undertaken to make these sacrifices, and will go in this matter to the utmost limits of her capacity.

Counter-proposals

1. Germany offers to proceed with her own disarmament in advance of all other peoples, in order to show that she will help to usher in the new era of the peace of justice. She gives up universal compulsory service and reduces her army to 100,000 men, except as regards temporary measures. She even renounces the warships which her enemies are still

willing to leave in her hands. She stipulates, however, that she shall be admitted forthwith as a State with equal rights into the League of Nations. She stipulates that a genuine League of Nations shall come into being, embracing all peoples of goodwill, even her enemies of today...

2. In territorial questions Germany takes up her position unreservedly on the ground of the Wilson program. She renounces her sovereign right in Alsace-Lorraine, but wishes a free plebiscite to take place there. She gives up the greater part of the province of Posen, the district incontestably Polish in population, together with the capital. She is prepared to grant to Poland, under international guarantees, free and secure access to the sea by ceding free ports at Danzig, Königsberg, and Memel, by an agreement regulating the navigation of the Vistula and by special railway conventions. Germany is prepared to insure the supply of coal for the economic needs of France, especially from the Saar region, until such time as the French mines are once more in working order... Germany demands that the right of self-determination shall also be respected where the interests of the Germans in Austria and Bohemia are concerned. She is ready to subject all her colonies to administration by the community of the League of Nations, if she is recognized as its mandatory.

3. Germany is prepared to make payments incumbent on her in accordance with the agreed program of peace up to a maximum sum of 100,000,000,000 gold marks, 20,000,000,000 by May 1, 1926, and the balance (80,000,000,000) in annual payments, without interest. These payments shall in principle be equal to a fixed percentage of the German Imperial and State revenues. The annual payment shall approximate to the former peace budget. For the first ten years the annual payments shall not exceed 1,000,000,000 gold marks a year...

4. ...To make good the loss in production of the destroyed mines of Northern France, up to 20,000,000 tons of coal will be delivered annually for the first five years, and up to 80,000,000 tons for the next five years. Germany will facilitate further deliveries of coal to France, Belgium, Italy, and Luxemburg. Germany is, moreover, prepared to make considerable deliveries of benzol, coal tar, and sulphate of ammonia, as well as dyestuffs and medicines...

7. Germany thinks that she sees an appropriate method for the prompt fulfilment of her obligation to make reparations conceding participation in coal mines to insure deliveries of coal...

9. The German delegation again makes its demand for a neutral inquiry into the responsibility for the war and culpable acts in conduct. An impartial commission should have the right to investigate on its own responsibility the archives of all the belligerent countries and all the persons who took an important part in the war. Nothing short of confidence that the question of guilt will be examined dispassionately can leave the peoples lately at war with each other in the proper frame of mind for the formation of the League of Nations...

This treaty of peace is to be the greatest achievement of its kind in all history. There is no precedent for the conduct of such comprehensive negotiations by an exchange of written notes only.

https://www.firstworldwar.com/source/parispeaceconf_germanprotest1.htm

Document 2: Georges Clemenceau's Letter of Reply to the Objections of the German Peace Delegation, May 1919
[Clemenceau was the French Prime Minister during WWI who demanded total victory over Germany.]

Sir:

The Allied and Associated Powers have given the most earnest consideration to the observations of the German Delegation on the conditions of peace.

The reply protests against the peace, both on the ground that it conflicts with the terms upon which the armistice of November 11, 1918, was signed, and that it is a peace of violence and not of justice.

The protest of the German Delegation shows that they utterly fail to understand the position in which Germany stands today. They seem to think that Germany has only to "make sacrifices in order to attain peace," as if this were but the end of some mere struggle for territory and power.

The Allied and Associated Powers therefore feel it necessary to begin their reply by a clear statement of the judgment passed upon the war by practically the whole of civilized mankind.

In the view of the Allied and Associated Powers the war which began on August 1, 1914, was the greatest crime against humanity and the freedom of peoples that any nation, calling itself civilized, has ever consciously committed.

For many years the rulers of Germany, true to the Prussian tradition, strove for a position of dominance in Europe. They were not satisfied with that growing prosperity and influence to which Germany was entitled, and which all other nations were willing to accord her, in the society of free and equal peoples. They required that they should be able to dictate and tyrannize to a subservient Europe, as they dictated and tyrannized over a subservient Germany.

In order to attain their ends they used every channel in their power through which to educate their own subjects in the doctrine that might was right in international affairs. They never ceased to expand German armaments by land and sea, and to propagate the falsehood that this was necessary because Germany's neighbours were jealous of her prosperity and power.

They sought to sow hostility and suspicion instead of friendship between nations. They developed a system of espionage and intrigue which enabled them to stir up internal rebellion and unrest and even to make secret offensive preparations within the territory of their neighbours whereby they might, when the moment came, strike them down with greater certainty and ease.

They kept Europe in a ferment by threats of violence, and when they found that their neighbours were resolved to resist their arrogant will they determined to assist their predominance in Europe by force.

As soon as their preparations were complete, they encouraged a subservient ally to declare war against Serbia at forty-eight hours' notice, knowing full well that a conflict involving the control of the Balkans could not be localized and almost certainly meant a general war. In order to make doubly sure, they refused every attempt at conciliation and conference until it was too late, and the world war was inevitable for which they had plotted, and for which alone among the nations they were fully equipped and prepared.

Germany's responsibility, however, is not confined to having planned and started the war. She is no less responsible for the savage and inhuman manner in which it was conducted.

Though Germany was herself a guarantor of Belgium, the ruler of Germany violated, after a solemn promise to respect it, the neutrality of this unoffending people. Not content with this, they deliberately carried out a series of promiscuous shootings and burnings with the sole object of terrifying the inhabitants into submission by the very frightfulness of their action.

They were the first to use poisonous gas, notwithstanding the appalling suffering it entailed. They began the bombing and long distance shelling of towns for no military object, but solely for the purpose of reducing the morale of their opponents by striking at their women and children. They commenced the submarine campaign with its piratical challenge to international law, and its destruction of great numbers of innocent passengers and sailors, in mid-ocean, far from succour, at the mercy of the winds and the waves, and the yet more ruthless submarine crews.

They drove thousands of men and women and children with brutal savagery into slavery in foreign lands. They allowed barbarities to be practiced against their prisoners of war from which the most uncivilized peoples would have recoiled.

The conduct of Germany is almost unexampled in human history. The terrible responsibility which lies at her doors can be seen in the fact that not less than seven million dead lie buried in Europe, while more than twenty million others carry upon them the evidence of wounds and sufferings, because Germany saw fit to gratify her lust for tyranny by resort to war.

The Allied and Associated Powers believe that they will be false to those who have given their all to save the freedom of the world if they consent to treat this war on any other basis than as a crime against humanity and right.

This attitude of the Allied and Associated Powers was made perfectly clear to Germany during the war by their principal statesmen...

https://www.firstworldwar.com/source/parispeaceconf_germanprotest2.htm