

The Ending of World War One, and the Legacy of Peace

By Martin Kitchen

Germany had high hopes of winning World War One - especially after astonishing advances early in 1918. Martin Kitchen explains how, despite these victories, Germany fell apart, how the blame game was played during the subsequent peace negotiations, and how this helped Hitler's rise to power.

Russia's exit

Russia's exit from World War One, in 1917, must have made an eventual victory for Germany seem quite likely to German leaders, and vindicated their nurturing of Russian dissidents. From the very early months of World War One, the German government had been in touch with exiled Russian revolutionaries, many of them Bolsheviks, in the hopes that they could be used to undermine the Russian war effort against Germany.

This didn't pay off in the first years of the war, but - although the Germans were in no way implicated - the February revolution in 1917 that eventually toppled the Russian tsarist regime raised German hopes that Russia would soon withdraw from the war. These hopes were soon dashed, as the new, provisional liberal government in Russia decided to continue to fight against Germany and the Central Powers.

Towards the end of March, however, the German foreign office and the High Command agreed to send one of the exiled Bolshevik leaders, Vladimir Lenin, plus 31 other émigrés opposed both to the tsarists and the liberals, back to Russia from Switzerland.

This was in the hopes that they would topple the Provisional Government and sue to bring an end to Russia's involvement in the war. A sealed train passed through Germany during the night of 10 to 11 April, with the conspirators hidden on board, and within a few months the policy appeared to be crowned with spectacular success.

Widespread war weariness among the general population of Russia was the major cause of the October Revolution of that year; this brought the Bolsheviks to power, and almost the first act of the new government was to publish its peace proposals on 8 November. The fighting on the Eastern Front ended within a few weeks, and a peace conference began its deliberations at Brest Litovsk on 22 December 1917.

The negotiations were lengthy and fractious and it was not until 3 March 1918 that the instruments were finally signed. Russia lost control of the Baltic States, Poland, Finland, the East Anatolian provinces, and the districts of Erdehan, Kars and Batum.

Ukraine became a theoretically independent state under German military occupation. Russia lost about one million square kilometers, and 50 million

inhabitants, in a treaty negotiated on the theoretical basis of a peace without annexations and reparations.

Knock-on effect

At first it seemed that Germany had won a significant victory. Russia was out of the war and the High Command had realised its annexationist ambitions in the east. But the treaty also caused a number of serious problems.

The lengthy deliberations seriously disrupted planning for the German spring offensive that was to begin on 21 March 1918. Over one million men were still in the east to enforce the treaty and to occupy the Ukraine. These forces were badly needed on the Western Front, and the disruption of agriculture due to war and civil war meant that they were able to extract precious little in the way of additional foodstuffs from the former Russian Empire to overcome the shortages at home.

Most serious of all, although very few of the German and allied troops were attracted to Communism, the Bolshevik appeal for an end to the war met with a powerful resonance and was the direct cause of a wave of strikes beginning in Vienna in January 1918 and spreading to Germany.

Despite these problems, and although a number of senior commanders were exceedingly sceptical about the chances of success, German expectations were high that the 'Michael' offensive across the old Somme battlefields in March would end the war, with Germany victorious.

The German Army made astonishing advances in the first few days of the offensive, advancing up to 60 kilometres (38 miles) and destroying the British Fifth Army. But the campaign soon became bogged down and degenerated into a series of limited attacks with no clear operational goal.

The French counter-attacked in July, the British in August, and it was now clear that the Central Powers could not possibly win the war. Germany had lost the initiative, Austria-Hungary was on the verge of collapse and there was a chronic shortage of manpower.

German disillusionment

By September, disillusionment was widespread among the Central Powers. Once again their hopes had been dashed. There had been so many promises that victory was imminent and that the High Command had the recipe for success.

The Schlieffen Plan had failed in 1914, as had the Verdun offensive in 1916. The campaign for unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917 had been a bitter disappointment and now the 'Great Battle in France' had ground to a halt and the Allies were pushing relentlessly forward in the last one hundred days of the war.

There was a generalised disillusionment with the Kaiser, the army leadership, and the government. In southern Germany, Prussia and Prussian militarism were blamed for the present wretched state of Germany and separatist sentiments ran high. Discontent in certain sections of the working class was such that some began to fear that the Reich might go the way of Russia. Germany faced the dire prospect of defeat and red revolution.

The civilian and military authorities knew that a peace negotiated on the basis of the idealistic Fourteen Points suggested by President Wilson of the United States would be exceedingly severe. They also knew that Germany would have to become a fully constitutional monarchy similar to that of the British, with a responsible parliamentary government, before the Allies would begin negotiations.

Collapse

On 29 September Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff told Kaiser Wilhelm II that the war was lost and that negotiations for an armistice based on President Wilson's peace proposals should begin at once.

The German High Command (OHL) was now determined that the blame for a lost war should be placed squarely on the shoulders of the majority parties in the Reichstag rather than on the military and the imperial elite. On 1 October Ludendorff told a group of senior officers: 'We shall now see these gentlemen enter various ministries. They can make the peace that has to be made. They can now eat the soup they have served up to us!'

For the time being the Kaiser remained on the throne, but power was now vested in the majority parties in the Reichstag, the largest of which was the Social Democratic Party (SPD), as part of the 'revolution from above' masterminded by Admiral Paul von Hintze, a devious, blasé and ambitious opportunist who had been appointed secretary of state for foreign affairs in July.

The 'stab in the back' legend that was to play such a critical role in the eventual downfall of the Weimar Republic (in January 1933) was thus carefully constructed in the late summer of 1918 - the leaders of the SPD party were set up to take the blame for Germany's defeat, while those who had pursued the war were soon portrayed as having been 'betrayed' by all around them.

Germany was rapidly falling apart in the last few weeks of the war. By October many soldiers had had enough, and there were mass desertions. The navy mutinied in November, when orders were issued for the High Sea's Fleet to launch a massive attack on the Royal Navy in an attempt to sabotage the armistice negotiations.

On 7 November a motley crew of socialists and anarchists under Kurt Eisner seized power in Munich. The King abdicated in Bavaria, and a republican 'Free State of Bavaria' was proclaimed. On the following day, revolutionary sailors and workers took over control in Brunswick. By 8 November Düsseldorf, Stuttgart,

Leipzig, Halle, Osnabrück and Cologne were in the hands of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils. The mayor of Cologne, Konrad Adenauer, calmly announced that he fully accepted the new circumstances.

Kaiser Wilhelm abdicated and the armistice was signed on 9 November to go into effect at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. Germany was now a republic in the joint hands of the theoretically Marxist Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the theoretically monarchist army.

Hard times

When the guns fell silent on 11 November most Germans confidently imagined that the peace settlement following the armistice would be based on a literal interpretation of Wilson's Fourteen Points.

They had few regrets at the prospect of losing Alsace-Lorraine and some of the Polish provinces, and even entertained the illusion that the new Austrian republic, proclaimed on 12 November, would be permitted to join a greater Germany, thus completing the process of German unification.

The hard-nosed realists in the OHL and their associates knew otherwise. They had negotiated the draconian peace of Brest-Litovsk, with Russia, on the basis of the self-determination of peoples, and the rejection of indemnities and reparations, and thus were well aware that the Fourteen Points would be interpreted in such a way as to bleed Germany white.

Some argued that the harsher the peace the better. The odium of ending the war had been shifted onto the majority parties and they could now bear the blame for a harsh peace and thus be totally discredited.

The Treaty of Versailles

The peace conference that led to the Treaty of Versailles began its deliberations in Paris in January 1919. The proceedings were dominated by the French Premier Georges Clemenceau and the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George - both of them pushed by vengeful electorates to make somewhat harsher demands of their adversaries than they might otherwise have made.

The Italian Minister President Vittorio Orlando and the American President Woodrow Wilson were also members of the Council of Four, where the most important issues were discussed.

The German government was informed of the Allied peace terms on 7 May, shortly after the counter-revolutionary bloodbath in Munich that put an end to a Quixotic socialist experiment. The proposals exceeded the worst fears of the direst of pessimists. That Germany should lose Upper Silesia, a large chunk of West Prussia, Danzig, Memel, and that East Prussia should be separated from the rest of Germany came as a devastating blow.

Things were hardly better in the west. The Saar, on the borders of France, was to be placed under the League of Nations for 15 years, the left bank of the Rhine permanently demilitarised, the entire Rhineland occupied for up to 15 years. Eupen-Malmedy was to be handed over to Belgium. An Anschluß with Austria was expressly forbidden. Germany's colonial empire was to be dissolved, as the Weimar Republic took shape.

The army was not to exceed 100,000 men. Military aircraft, submarines, and tanks were among a number of outlawed weapons. The fleet was to surrender, but it was scuttled before it reached the naval base at Scapa Flow. Ninety per cent of the merchant navy had to be handed over, along with 10 per cent of the cattle and a substantial proportion of the rolling stock of the state railway.

The victors were unable to agree on a final sum for reparations, but 40 million tons of coal were demanded annually. Germans were particularly incensed by article 231, which demanded of them to make good the damage caused by a war which they and their allies had begun. A deliberate mistranslation of this article (ie 231), making it refer to Germany's 'sole guilt' (Alleinschuld) (as opposed to the joint guilt of Germany and her allies, which was the wording in the original text) further inflamed a consternated public and set off an ever increasing wave of righteous indignation about the 'war guilt lie'.

An uneasy peace

Although all Germans were determined to see a revision of the treaty eventually, and to return to something like the frontiers of 1913, it would be a mistake to imagine that the Treaty of Versailles was the direct cause of World War II. By 1925 the way was certainly open for a peaceful renegotiation of the peace settlement, but Adolf Hitler - who by this time was exploiting the economic, social and political crises of the Weimar Republic on his way to becoming chancellor in January 1933 - had an insatiable desire for conquest that could not be sated by such means.

His fury, at first, was directed against the democratic parties in the Reichstag - whom he called the 'November criminals', and whom he regarded as having stabbed Germany in the back when they accepted the humiliating terms of the Peace of Versailles - rather than towards Lloyd George and Clemenceau, who were the principal architects of the settlement. Hitler constantly harped on the theme that the Weimar Republic was born of a self-inflicted defeat, and thus had no legitimacy. His ferocious attacks on the Treaty of Versailles, one of the most effective of his ideological weapons, were thus directed against the Republic that he was determined to destroy.

The principal weakness of the Treaty of Versailles was that it was harsh enough to incense all Germans, while Germany was in a stronger position than in 1913, since it was now surrounded by weak and divided states and the Ententes of 1914 had fallen apart. This offered a golden opportunity for Germany to make a second bid for European domination.