

Lesson: Treaty of Versailles

Primary Source Analysis

The following are excerpts from two letters about the Treaty of Versailles. The first letter is from the leader of the German Peace Delegation, Count von Brockdorff-Rantzau, to French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, the Paris Peace Conference President, expressing concern over the peace terms. The second letter is PM Clemenceau's response to the objections of the German Peace Delegation. Both letters were written in May 1919.

*Retrieved from The First World War: www.firstworldwar.com (Accessed September 4, 2016.)

Brockdorff-Rantzau's letter to Clemenceau

Mr. President:

I have the honour 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 principals...

We were aghast when we read in documents the demands made upon us, the victorious violence of our enemies.

The more deeply we penetrate this 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...

...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 principal to bear all the war expenses of her enemies, which would exceed many times over the total amount of German State and private assets...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 hand over to our enemies our property in all German enterprises abroad, even in the countries of our allies...We must completely renounce our colonies...The German people are excluded from the League of Nations, to which is entrusted all work of common interest to the world... Germany knows that she must make sacrifices in order to attain peace...

Counter-proposals

1. Germany offers to proceed with her own disarmament...that she will help to usher in the new era of the peace of justice...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 peoples of goodwill, even her enemies of today...

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 of 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...

Only the cooperation of all nations, a cooperation of hands and spirits, can build up a durable peace. We are under no delusions regarding the strength of the hatred and bitterness which this war has engendered, and yet the forces which are at work for a union of mankind are stronger now than ever they were before.

Accept, Mr. President, the expression of my distinguished consideration.

Brockdorff-Rantzau

Clemenceau's reply letter to Brockdorff-Rantzau and the German Delegation

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 Delegations 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.

I

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...

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...

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...

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...

Justice, therefore, is the only possible basis for the settlement of the accounts of this terrible war. Justice is what the German Delegation asks for and say that Germany had been promised.

Justice is what Germany shall have. But it must be justice for all. There must be justice for the dead and wounded and for those who have been orphaned and bereaved that Europe might be freed from Prussian despotism. There must be justice for the peoples who now stagger under war debts which exceed 130,000,000,000 that liberty might be saved. There must be justice for those millions whose homes and lands, ships and property German savagery has spoliated and destroyed...

...If these things are hardships for Germany, they are hardships which Germany has brought upon herself. Somebody must suffer for the consequences of the war. Is it to be Germany, or only the peoples she has wronged?

...Throughout the war, as before the war, the German people and their representatives supported the war, voted the credits, subscribed to the war loans, obeyed every order, however savage, of their government. They shared the responsibility for the policy of their government, for at any moment, had they willed it, they could have reversed it.

Had that policy succeeded they would have acclaimed it with the same enthusiasm with which they welcomed the outbreak of the war. They cannot now pretend, having changed their rulers after the war was lost, that it is justice that they should escape the consequences of their deeds.

II

The Allied and Associated Powers therefore believe that the peace they have proposed is fundamentally a peace of justice...

IV

The German Delegation appear to have seriously misinterpreted the economic and financial conditions. There is no intention on the part of the Allied and Associated Powers to strangle Germany or to prevent her from taking her proper place in international trade and commerce...

V

The German Delegation have greatly misinterpreted the reparation proposals of the treaty. These proposals confine the amount payable by Germany to what is clearly justifiable under the terms of armistice in respect of damage caused to the civilian population of the Allies by German aggression.

VI

The Allied and Associated Powers have given careful consideration to the request of the German Delegation that Germany should at once be admitted to the League of Nations. They find themselves unable to accede to this request...In the present temper of international feeling, it is impossible to expect the free nations of the world to sit down immediately in equal association with those by whom they have been so grievously wronged.

The Allied and Associated Powers therefore require a declaration from the German Delegation within five days from the date of this communication that they are prepared to sign the treaty as it stands today...