

Arnold Brecht on the Versailles Treaty (Retrospective Account, 1966)

Abstract

On June 16, 1919, the Entente powers presented Germany with an ultimatum: the government was to accept the Versailles Treaty or run the risk of invasion. The members of the German National Assembly realized that they were in a tight spot, but the majority still rejected two of the treaty's articles, Article 227 (stipulating the extradition of the Kaiser and the establishment of an international court to prosecute German war crimes) and Article 231 (the so-called War Guilt Clause). On June 22, an overwhelming majority voted in favor of accepting the treaty, provided that these two articles were excluded. On June 23, in the face of a new ultimatum by the Entente, some parliamentarians engaged in a bit of procedural maneuvering whereby the version of the treaty approved the day before was accepted, *with* the two excluded articles, but without being put to another vote. A majority in favor of acceptance was thereby achieved.

In factual terms, the punitive measures outlined in the Versailles Treaty (Art. 227–230) were not especially harshly enforced. The “War Guilt Clause,” however, offered anti-democratic/nationalist forces in Germany ample opportunity for pro-German, war innocence propaganda and related agitation; it also contributed to the ongoing sense of alienation many Germans felt toward the Weimar Republic.

Arnold Brecht (1884–1977) was a high-ranking civil servant and one of the few members of the social elite to defend the young German democracy. A few days after Hitler came to power, he was dismissed from the civil service and in November 1933 he emigrated to the United States, where he taught at the New School for Social Research in New York. This excerpt from the first volume of his memoirs sheds light on the difficult situation in which the new German government found itself in the face of the ultimatum.

Source

After it had been made clear that the government would attempt to have the two clauses dropped before signing, the National Assembly voted for the signing on June 22 with a considerable majority (237 votes to 138). But Clemenceau immediately rejected such a conditional acceptance, on behalf of the Allies, and demanded unconditional acceptance “within the remaining twenty-four hours,” threatening that, if this were not done, the allied armies would march into Germany. Once again the National Assembly was consulted and, weakly and hesitantly, without a roll call, stated that the authorization given the previous day covered the present situation. The Cabinet then decided not to exempt the two clauses from the signature, but to lodge a strongly worded protest and appeal to Wilson's points.

Charged with the transmission of this momentous decision to our representative in Paris, I hurried late at night from the National Assembly to the grand-ducal palace, edited details of the text, and was present during the technical transmission to Paris. “The government of the German Republic, yielding to overwhelming power and without abandoning its view of the unheard-of injustice of the peace conditions, declares itself to be ready to accept and sign the peace conditions imposed by the Allied and Associated governments.”

Hindenburg and Groener resigned. General von Seeckt, appointed in place of Groener, was made directly subordinate to Minister of Defense Noske.

Looking back on the situation at that time and wondering what ought to have been done, I am unable even now to come to a determined, logically conclusive result. Unfortunately in politics there is not always a solution. Many political problems cannot be solved. This was such a problem. The question of its solubility or insolubility had nothing to do with the form of government.

Perhaps the fear of occupation by the Allies was too great. Had they occupied the whole of Germany they would have been responsible for governing Germany and would have had to assure reasonable living conditions, just as in 1945. After great humiliation in the beginning, a quicker and more constructive cooperation between the occupation forces and the democratic parties in Germany might have evolved. Rathenau was, therefore, perhaps not entirely wrong when he recommended that the German government resign without renewing military resistance, and leaving the responsibility to the Allies. In engaging in such afterthought, however, one should not ignore the fact that the successful cooperation between the Western powers and the West German democratic leaders after 1945 was stimulated by two factors which were not at work in 1919: awareness on the side of the Western powers of the serious mistakes they had made after 1918, and the pressure exercised by the policy of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, although leaving total responsibility to the Allies might have possibly averted the need of a one-sided confession of guilt, the Allies' hold on the "war criminals" would have been probably much harsher.

Source: Arnold Brecht, *The Political Education of Arnold Brecht, An Autobiography 1884–1970*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970, pp. 168–69.

Source of original German text: Arnold Brecht, *Aus nächster Nähe, Lebenserinnerungen 1884–1927*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1966, pp. 282–83.

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