

# National Assembly Debate on the Treaty of Versailles (June 22, 1919)

## Abstract

---

Although the armistice of November 11, 1918, had ended hostilities, the official peace treaty, known as the Treaty of Versailles, was not signed until June 28, 1919. The treaty required Germany to disarm, release prisoners of war and those accused of war crimes, agree to a trial of Kaiser Wilhelm II, cede territories in Europe and give up its former colonies, recognize the independence of Poland and Czechoslovakia and pay reparations to the Entente powers. The army's general staff was to be dissolved, the army reduced to 100,000 soldiers and its armament strictly limited. In addition, the treaty stipulated in Article 231, also known as the "War Guilt Clause," that Germany bore full responsibility for the war and the damage caused. The treaty, and especially the "War Guilt Clause," was considered too harsh and unjust by most Germans. However, the Entente powers refused to soften the provisions of the treaty and threatened Germany with the invasion of their troops and the continuation of the naval blockade by Great Britain if the German government did not ratify the treaty. On June 20, 1919, the government under Prime Minister Philipp Scheidemann resigned rather than sign the treaty, which it recognized as inevitable. In a session of the National Assembly two days later, on June 22, 1919, the Treaty of Versailles was debated before a vote was taken on its ratification. Arthur von Posadowsky-Wehner (DNVP), a conservative politician from Silesia and former Vice-Chancellor of the German Reich and Prussian Minister of State, gave a speech at this session in which he denounced the treaty. In his speech, excerpts of which are reproduced here, Posadowsky-Wehner, a staunch monarchist who rejected the new republic and its government, condemned the treaty as a threat to Germany's culture and economy due to the loss of its military, its colonies and its former territories. He rejected the "War Guilt Clause," portraying foreign powers as enemies who wanted to weaken Germany and exploit it to their advantage. In the end, the National Assembly voted 237 to 138 in favor of ratifying the treaty.

## Source

---

### 40th Session.

Sunday, June 22, 1919.

[...]

Dr. Count **v. Posadowsky-Wehner**, deputy: Our fatherland finds itself in the gravest moment of its history. The enemy is at our gates and worrying signs of dissolution are evident within our country. Each government that emerged from the revolution will naturally try to introduce a new order of things, but it must be an order. Thus far, the government has not succeeded in introducing this order, which guarantees the security of civil life and property. We were therefore also not in a position to give our **vote of confidence** to the previous **government**, nor are we in a position to issue such a vote of confidence for the current one.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

It is also surprising that a government that has just stepped onto the stage, whose achievements are as yet unknown, already expects a vote of confidence.

(Very good! From the right.)

---

The 12th of May this year was a great day, which we experienced when the session of the National Assembly was convened in the Academy auditorium. We had the impression at the time that virtually all parties, or at least the vast majority of the house, were determined not to accept these terms of peace. We were bolstered in this conviction by the gripping speech by our revered president at the close of our session.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

I ask you now: What concretely has changed since then? The alteration in the peace overtures our enemies made to us are barely visible to the naked eye,

(Quite correct! From the right)

and have scant political or economic significance.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

It will be up to future historians to discern what considerations led the previous great majority, without any change in the underlying facts, apparently to change their minds and become inclined to favor this peace treaty.

In our party we are completely aware of the grave consequences that **rejecting the peace treaty** can have for our people, for our country.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

But the evils that may ensue can only be temporary,

(Quite correct! From the right)

whereas, if we accept this treaty, we expose untold generations of our nation to misery.

(Lively agreement from the right.)

In this case, the generation alive now must have the great gallantry to bear the present consequences in the interest of future generations.

(Lively agreement from the right.)

This treaty is unacceptable to us for many reasons. First, for military reasons! England, America, which introduced **universal conscription** during the war, now want to force us by this treaty to abolish universal conscription in Germany and replace patriotic honorary service with an army of mercenary soldiers.

(Very true! From the right.)

Universal conscription was a true fountain of youth for Germany,

(Quite correct! From the right)

a hygienic and moral education decisive for the entire development of our people. Now we are supposed to abolish universal conscription, the pride of Germany; they even go so far as to dictate to us the number of police units we may maintain to guarantee our country's security. The abolition of universal military service signals an incredible moral and hygienic loss for our whole people.

---

(Quite correct! From the right.)

They expect us to stand there defenseless, with no reserves, airplanes or general staff. Our technical equipment is to be restricted, we are to demolish our fortresses, we are to be robbed of our 14 cables. They want to establish oversight of our telegraph stations. We are to maintain no military air forces. What else does this say but that we are defenseless before any larcenous neighbor, any scheming adventurous statesman from another country, if they choose to go against us, unless the nebulous League of Nations prevents it.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

The abolition of our standing army, of universal conscription, the restriction to 100,000 men actually renders us defenseless, and as the saying goes: "Defenseless, honorless!" [Wehrlos, ehrlos].

(Lively agreement from the right.)

The provisions of this peace overture signal a veritable military disenfranchisement of Germany. These provisions reduce us to a people of Helots beholden to our enemies. Moreover, these restrictions are imposed on us with no assurance that the other states will also abolish universal military service or reduce their troops to the same degree.

And along with rendering us defenseless comes the **seizure of land**. We are to lose territory nearly three-quarters the size of Great Britain, with a population of some 8 million people. **Alsace-Lorraine** in particular is under consideration. It is peculiar how quickly we in Germany, or so it seems, have tacitly accepted relinquishing Alsace-Lorraine.

(Lively agreement from the right.)

Whenever they speak of Alsace-Lorraine, our enemies always refer only to 1870/71, they do not mention the time when this German land—Alsace is overwhelmingly German, at least 95 percent— was stolen by Bourbon rapacity.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

This is all the stranger considering that **Upper Silesia**, which has been separated from the Polish crown since 1253, is being demanded back for Poland.

(Very good! From the right.)

This is the poetic justice of our enemies! They are also stealing the **Saar Valley** with its mineral resources, an entire German land. Poland was created so artificially that it runs as a broad belt along the entire Russian border, between Germany and the former Russia. Thus Poland lies before Russia, with Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, our natural hinterlands, from the Baltic to the Adriatic Sea. To this end they even lay claim to part of **East Prussia**. It is a diabolical plan, that aims to sandwich Germany between a France bent on vengeance and a Poland unwilling to reconcile. East Prussia, a land created by the Teutonic Knights, was under Polish rule for 194 years, and these 194 years were a period of the worst decline under Polish administration. Our enemies are forever speaking of freedom, of the self-determination of peoples. They claim to stand at a higher stage of culture and tell us every day that the Germans have shown themselves to be a people on the lowest level of culture; at the same time, however, they are leading the entire East under Polish rule to a lower level of culture and removing the culturally far more advanced German people there.

I have already stated: **Upper Silesia** has been severed from the Polish crown since 1253; the Polish kings

---

repeatedly acknowledged their renunciation of sovereignty over Upper Silesia. Upper Silesia is quite properly a German, a Prussian creation. For half of the last century there were doubts about whether it was even worth building a railroad to Upper Silesia, a land of poor soils and great pine forests. Upper Silesia's rich natural resources have only been tapped by German labor. And now they want to steal this land from us with no compensation whatsoever! A **vote** was promised in Upper Silesia, but the response of our enemies expressly states that a military occupation will be necessary, and that much time will pass before a vote. This already shows which means will be applied to ensure that the vote goes in a direction that favors our enemies.

I would like to remind the government here of a very serious circumstance. The anarchy that now prevails in so many areas of the state administration has also meant the end of all orderly border controls, and I have learned from a reliable source that thousands of subjects of the former Kingdom of Poland are streaming into Upper Silesia and working there to influence the population in favor of annexation to Poland.

(Hear! Hear! From the right.)

We can also imagine approximately how this vote is likely to go.

(Shouting from the Social Democrats.)

— No, that is no exaggeration, it is quite correct.

They also want to take away **Posen** and **West Prussia**: Posen, where—to follow Mr. Wilson— there are no purely Polish districts; West Prussia, which is predominately German! By claiming these provinces, they are robbing us of the connection with East Prussia. East Prussia will be reduced to a scattered parcel of Germany. What is more, parts of the great eastern railroad, which links us with East Prussia, will fall into Polish hands. The sources of the Netze [Polish Noteć] Canal built by Frederick the Great, which connects the Oder and Vistula rivers, are located in the future Polish state. These sources can be cut off from us, thereby draining the Warthe-Netze Canal and with it rendering transport by water, namely of East Prussia timber, virtually impossible or far more expensive. Middle Germany in particular, however, absolutely depends on the transport of timber through the Netze Canal. The notion to **establish a Kingdom of Poland** was the most suicidal foolishness ever committed by a government.

(Quite correct! From the right)

The only possible explanation for it is that the men responsible had no idea of the conditions and thus acted extremely irresponsibly. History will always hold this against them. They will never be free of this accusation. Now the Poles are meant to move into the territories of Posen and West Prussia, which Germany was the first to make arable, probably according to the familiar principle: Make way for the industrious!

Our **colonies!** We acquired our colonies lawfully,

(Shouts from the left.)

— lawfully. Now England dares to tell us the German people have shown themselves incapable of governing foreign colonized peoples; the same England that has oppressed India for centuries, extracting incredible riches from her, while the Indian population lives in the most abject misery; the same England that almost completely excludes the large class of educated Indians from the country's administration. Belgium, whose disgraceful rule in the Congo is still in all our memories, dares to utter this impertinence.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

---

Our enemies are so fond of talking of the self-determination of the various peoples. Why doesn't England introduce this right to **self-determination** in Ireland? Why does it not introduce this principle in India? But people juggle as seems appropriate to them at the time. There is no self-determination for the people of Alsace-Lorraine, and no referendum. A vote is supposed to take place in Upper Silesia and in parts of East Prussia and Posen.

In addition to the seizure of land there are the **economic terms**. According to this peace treaty, we are to lose 70 percent of our iron ore, 30 percent of our coal, our tin mines, 12 percent of our food supply. Germany is a highly developed country, one can now say a highly developed industrial country, which has to import 25 percent of its foodstuffs. We had a high import surplus, because we had a large processing industry. We depended in part on raw materials that existed in our own country and in part on those imported from abroad. Now we are to be robbed of the greater part of our raw materials and will depend on our hate-filled enemies to supply raw materials. Under the circumstances, German industry cannot possibly even begin to maintain the status quo. But only through our mighty industry are we in a position to bear the financial burdens we have taken on and are expected to take on in future.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

The same adversary who imposes these colossal financial burdens upon us robs us of the possibility to acquire the means to bear them.

In the process, we are to pledge to build all of the railroads and canals whose construction our enemies demand of us. Similarly, we are to be obliged to issue all of the laws and ordinances needed to implement the peace treaty. This is the end of German sovereignty.

This whole **peace treaty** is the work of various **bureaucratic agencies**. Each agency has worked on the peace treaty in its own interest, has seen what it can get out of Germany; but there has been no rational hand that could have revised this senseless document and formed it in a way that made any economic sense.

(Very true! From the right.)

Our financial performance is directly connected with the import of raw materials, with the ownership of our own raw materials. Anyone who has studied how people thought about the question of reparations in the negotiations of the French chamber must realize what it means: **compensating our enemies**. And this compensation is meant to extend not merely to France, but also to Serbia, Montenegro, to Romania, including the damage caused by the foes themselves; Italy has also made claims; we are to compensate Romania and Italy, who declared war on us, for all war damages. Scrutinizing these negotiations over the French reparations law, it becomes evident that incredible demands for reparations will ensue, which we could not pay off in a century. These reparations will naturally be set based on the reports and estimates of the local authorities. Just imagine what reparations will be demanded at the expense of the hated foe. This means the financial abyss for us.

The previous government had declared itself prepared to pay one **hundred billion** as a **one-time indemnity**. I was horrified by this sum, all the more so because it was actually not one hundred billion, but probably two or three hundred billion. For these reparations are to be paid in gold, and it is quite impossible for our currency to rise to the old levels as long as we are unable to acquire an adequate amount of gold currency through foreign trade, and accordingly to back our bank notes in part with gold again in accord with the Banking Law. But our enemies rejected even this compensation of one hundred billion. They clearly want even greater reparations, and they expect us to pay these reparations in gold, i.e., probably three times the amount in our currency. These are completely preposterous demands, and in my opinion, we cannot accept such nonsensical demands.

---

Another consideration for the future financial burden on Germany is that our enemies reserve the right to **confiscate all claims by German nationals** in the hostile countries; but not merely the claims of German nationals in hostile countries, but also the claims of German nationals in the countries that are now to be separated from Germany. This is a virtually unprecedented infringement upon private property.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

Finally, the **criminal clause**. Based on a criminal code yet to be created, a criminal code with retroactive force, they dare to expect a great nation of nearly 70 million to hand over German nationals to the foe for sentencing. This is probably the most dishonorable demand ever directed at a civilized nation in modern times.

(Agreement and cries from the right: Outrageous!)

They call for the **extradition** of the former emperor, of military leaders, of officers and civil servants who performed their military and civilian duties on German sovereign territory; after all, the occupied territories too, as long as they were occupied, were under German state sovereignty. I know that in one case in the occupied territory west of the Rhine the French authorities expressly stated, according to the same principle, that the occupied German territory is under French sovereignty. We are therefore supposed to deliver persons whose official acts were performed on German territory, under German sovereignty, to the jurisdiction of a foreign state. In my view, we need to reject this demand just as firmly whether it involves the German emperor and generals or the humblest German citizen,

(lively agreement from the right)

because this demand is simply unbearable for the self-esteem of a nation.

(Bravo! And quite correct! From the right.)

It is the theft of our sovereignty.

(Renewed agreement from the right.)

If this peace treaty is to go into effect, it doubtless signals the complete economic collapse of Germany. I regret that broad segments of our people have not yet realized this consequence clearly enough. If economic life comes to a standstill everyone compelled to earn a living will suffer.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

Otherwise, the resistance to this peace treaty would be quite different. When, however, the tax collector and the rural police come and take the farmer's few animals from his barn the lamenting and gnashing of teeth will begin; then people will sharply criticize those who accepted this treaty.

(Lively agreement from the right.)

Let me briefly address the **matter of guilt**. The press, with all its technology, has succeeded in hammering the idea of German guilt into the minds of the world. I blame the previous bourgeois government for not confronting this ongoing slander early and effectively.

(Very true! From the right.)

Germany's guilt has not been proven. Even President Wilson has declared, "The matter of guilt cannot be decided so easily; the evolution of this war and the question of guilt lie deep in the roots of history." Thus President Wilson himself did not dare to say that Germany is the guilty party. Even an English author like

---

[George] Bernard Shaw publicly says of Belgium that Belgium was never neutral.

(Hear! hear! From the right.)

If you have read the most recent publications from the Russian archives, publications that were unfortunately held back for a year, they show as clear as day that Russia wanted the war, that Russia already stood at our borders with a strong contingent of troops ready and determined to strike,

(Quite correct! From the right)

that Russia fully intended to wage war against us. France did its duty as an ally, and England deemed it a very opportune moment to crush its economic and naval rival.

(Agreement from the right.)

Alas we made certain partial concessions on the question of guilt, which I consider a great weakness.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

This was of course our enemies' intention, to brand us forever in history with the blemish of this world war, and I believe that the simplest duty to our own state demands that, as long as the evidence of our guilt is not clearly provided, we reject this assertion repeatedly and emphatically.

The entire treaty and all the demands for reparations are built on the question of guilt. I hope that the international assessment of Germany's position in this war will also change with time. I know that there are fair-minded people in all countries. But unfortunately, the populations of the hostile countries have not yet had the chance to make their own judgements about this peace proposal, because the hostile governments were apparently ashamed to inform them about this disgraceful treaty.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

It is unprecedented in history in countries with a parliamentary system to seek to sign a peace treaty whose contents are kept secret from one's own population and parliament. Therein lies the acknowledgement of a sense of responsibility, of a guilty conscience among our enemies.

(Lively agreement from the right.)

If we **reject this treaty**, we are merely affirming the standpoint of the last, recently resigned government. The **counter-proposals** of this government forcefully demonstrate, page for page, that this treaty is unacceptable, unbearable and unrealizable for us.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

The changes to the treaty in response to our counter-proposals carry virtually no weight. Thus, were the last government still in office, it would be compelled to recommend the rejection of this treaty; however, various ministers from the previous government have joined the present government.

We are warned of the **terrible consequences** that will ensue if we reject this treaty! To be sure, when a nation faces such hours of decision, it must also anticipate serious consequences. Moltke once said: "In war, everything is dangerous." And we are still at war. Do we believe that in future, our enemies will not, if necessary, deploy the same means of coercion against us that they do now in response to our rejection of the treaty? There is no point in signing an initialed treaty under protest. If we place our signature there, we agree before the world to the content of the treaty; our enemies will no longer place the slightest value in the subsidiary defense of a verbal or written protest. The government itself has

---

declared that this treaty is unbearable and unrealizable, and since we cannot fulfil the treaty, hostile governments will in future take the same punitive measures with which they are now threatening us.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

We are threatened with a continuation of the **blockade**. England has the whole world up in arms against the sinking of the Lusitania, although the shipping line was warned not to enter our naval battle area, our minefield. England however imposes a blockade on Germany, as a result of which hundreds of thousands of people have already lost their lives, and hundreds of thousands of children also face miserable infirmity or have died of malnutrition. No one speaks of these English mass murders. I hope that English sailors will no longer agree to serve as executioners.

We trustingly obeyed **Wilson's 14 Points**. Now, however, it transpires that these 14 Wilsonian points are a single dark spot for our fatherland. If we read through the declarations that President Wilson issued about the peace, we are compelled to say: Every single provision of this peace treaty stands in glaring contrast to President Wilson's many declarations.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

President Wilson disappointed us; I am too polite to say he deceived us. He professed to be a pure "friend" of Germany; he wanted this war to have neither victors nor vanquished. Germany should experience no injustice. At any rate, President Wilson's actions during these entire peace negotiations are a psychological puzzle, and the image of his character fluctuates in history.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

This treaty is a Shylock treaty: President Wilson, however, was not the Samuel, the wise judge, to put this usurious treaty to shame.

I have expressed the hope that, as this peace treaty becomes increasingly well known, voices will arise abroad as well that reach a fairer assessment of the German people. An English journal, **The New Statesman**, notes:

"For the first time in five years, we have no choice but to believe that right is no longer on our side, but on that of the Hun. There appears to be little doubt that the great majority of British citizens and an even greater one of English soldiers shares this view."

(Hear! hear! From the right.)

The conditions of the Allies may find defenders in public life, but no one supports them in individual life.

(Hear! hear! From the right.)

I hope that this mood will become increasingly widespread in England.

I would like now to move on to a very particular matter. It seems that we will lose the **Ostmark**, and our German compatriots there are subject to the greatest dangers in the form of inhumane and unjust treatment by the Poles.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

I ask the government to press the governments of the entente and convince them to pledge to treat our fellow Germans in the ceded territories with fairness and humanity.

---

(Quite correct! From the right.)

Our fellow Germans cannot all leave their houses and farms. I would consider it the greatest misfortune if panic were to break out now in the East and these masses of people were to rush helplessly to the West, rendering our difficult circumstances more difficult still. I believe that those people who have homes and farms are correct in persevering.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

But the government must also insist to our enemies that they advocate in this connection for the fair and humane treatment of our fellow citizens. Let the enemy governments show that they truly belong to a civilized people.

(Quite correct! From the right.)

Greek tragedies often focus on the portrayal of hubris, that wicked human overconfidence that provokes the vengeance and punishment of the gods; I hope that for our enemies, too, the day will come when the vengeance of the gods rains down upon them. We must in any case do everything we can to bring that day closer. Above all, we will have the serious **task in future** of maintaining a love of fatherland and an inner affiliation with Germany among those fellow members of the German tribe who have been torn from our midst and live under foreign rule,

(lively cries of Bravo from the right),

saving them from succumbing to alien influence and losing their nationality.

[...]

Source of original German text: Nationalversammlung. – 40th session, Sunday, June 22, 1919, *Reichstagsprotokolle*, 1919/20,2, pp. 1120–24. Accessible online at:  
[http://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt2\\_wv\\_bsb00000011\\_00384.html](http://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt2_wv_bsb00000011_00384.html)

Translation: Pam Selwyn

Recommended Citation: National Assembly Debate on the Treaty of Versailles (June 22, 1919), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-4635>> [March 16, 2026].