

Matthias Erzberger on the Dissolution of the Former Imperial Army (October 30, 1919)

Abstract

Matthias Erzberger (1875–1921) rose from a modest, Catholic background to become one of the most prominent and important politicians during the First World War and the early years of the Weimar Republic. That he did so without having a noble pedigree, background of military service, or a university degree made his rise all the more remarkable.

First elected as a member of the Catholic Center Party (Zentrum) to the Reichstag in 1903, under the old Imperial government, Erzberger harnessed his trademark capacity for hard work to master that legislative body's procedural practices in minute detail. He initially supported Germany's aggressive pursuit of military victory in the First World War, but his position had evolved by 1917 into one of advocating for an immediate, negotiated peace. Just over a year later, Erzberger led the four-person German delegation that signed the Armistice on November 11, 1918, a necessary and thankless task that made him a target of the far right's animus. He also advocated German compliance with the Treaty of Versailles as the least-worst option available to the defeated nation, even as he criticized the terms of the Treaty as unduly harsh. All of these efforts to ensure peace had made Erzberger a marked man, and on August 26, 1921, a far-right hit squad assassinated him while he was taking a morning walk.

Erzberger, who had been appointed Minister of Finance in June 1919, delivered the brief comments here on the "Dissolution of the former Imperial Army" as part of his speech on the national budget to the National Assembly on October 30, 1919. Germany had grudgingly signed the Treaty of Versailles four months earlier and subsequently adopted its terms as German law. A key term required Germany to drastically reduce the size of its army to just 100,000 men, a time-consuming process that simultaneously entailed dissolving the old Imperial Army altogether and designing the new, smaller force that would take its place. Resistant military officials had slowed the reduction process even further, and the entity known as the "temporary army" (*vorläufige Reichswehr*) still had around 300,000 men under arms in late 1919.

In this passage, Erzberger vented his frustration at the military's sluggish process—warning that "military authorities throughout the country should listen" to the statement he was about to make—and then proceeded to assert his power over the purse strings to issue a deadline for the army to complete its reduction. In the event, the process still extended past the date that Erzberger had given. As of April 1, 1920, the army still had around 200,000 men in its ranks, double to treaty-allowed limit. That number gradually shrank to 150,000 by October 1920, before ultimately reaching the 100,000-man goal by January 1921.

Source

[...]

And then we have a second significant item related to this, namely the resolution of the affairs of the former imperial army for three billion marks. This is as pertains to the matters of personnel. I hereby declare—and this should be heard by every military post in the country: as of April 1, 1920, the Reich Financial Administration will no longer be in a position to spend a single cent on the dissolution of the former imperial army. If it proves impossible to complete the dissolution process in the next five months,

the financial administration will request authorization to do a final tally of these expenditures and consider them settled. We have five months time to deal with the related matters of personnel, and if this task is carried out within the individual organizations, they must be capable of completing the dissolution within these five months. The war has been over since November 9, 1918, and I believe it is a generous accommodation to set March 21, 1920, as the end of the period for resolving all matters of personnel related to the dissolution.

[...]

Source of the original German text: *Nationalversammlungs-Drucksachen*, 113. Sitzung; reprinted in *Reden zur Neuordnung des deutschen Finanzwesens*, Reichsminister der Finanzen, Matthias Erzberger. Berlin: Verlag von Reimar Hobbing, 1919, p. 79.

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