

Minister President Gustav Bauer Asks the National Assembly to Ratify the Versailles Treaty (June 23, 1919)

Abstract

In this June 1919 audio clip, Minister President Gustav Bauer (SPD) urged the German National Assembly to vote in favor of signing the Treaty of Versailles, in spite of how intensely they hated its assumptions, conditions, and impositions. Bauer found himself in an unenviable position. He had only just assumed his office two days earlier, after his predecessor and fellow Social Democrat Philipp Scheidemann had resigned in a futile protest against the treaty. Scheidemann knew that Germany had no choice but to accept what the Allies had presented, and his grandstanding gesture foisted the unpleasant task of rallying support in the National Assembly onto his successor. Bauer had already risen to the occasion once, on June 22—just the day before this speech—when he convinced the Assembly to support signing on condition that the Allies remove the “war guilt clause,” which attributed responsibility for the conflagration to Germany alone. The Allies flatly rejected that condition and delivered an ultimatum to the German government just hours before this June 23 speech: Accept and sign the treaty exactly as written or face renewed military conflict. Delivering his words just four hours before the Allies’ ultimatum was to expire, Bauer urgently explained why his government had to sign the treaty, lest Germany find itself in renewed hostilities against overwhelming Allied forces that would impose even more vindictive provisions in the future. Moreover, Britain’s navy refused to allow any shipments of desperately needed food and supplies into German ports—what German officials called a “hunger blockade”—until the German government signed. Given this circumstance, a majority of the National Assembly voted to sign the Treaty of Versailles and end the war, even though every single party in the National Assembly vehemently opposed the “war guilt clause,” including Bauer’s own SPD. On June 28, five days later, the German delegation reluctantly put their signatures on the dotted line. Eleven days later, in yet another contentious session, the Assembly voted 209-116 to officially ratify the treaty, with the DDP refusing to join its “Weimar Coalition” partners, the SPD and Zentrum, in casting the bitterly necessary votes in favor. Having survived this initial trial by fire, Gustav Bauer managed to stay in office until March 1920, although the new constitution, adopted in August 1919, stipulated that the title of his office formally change from “Minister President” to “Reich Chancellor.”

Source

Source: SWR 2 Archivradio,
<https://www.swr.de/swrkultur/wissen/archivradio/versailer-vertrag-reichskanzler-gustav-bauer-er-klaert-zustimmung-1919-100.html>

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