

National Assembly Debate on the Peace Treaty (June 23, 1919)

Abstract

Although the armistice of November 11, 1918, ended the actual fighting, the official peace treaty, the Treaty of Versailles, was not signed until June 28, 1919. The treaty obliged Germany to disarm, release prisoners of war and suspected war criminals, consent 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 Allies. The General Staff of the army was to be dissolved, the army reduced to 100,000 soldiers and its armament strictly limited. In addition, Article 231 of the Treaty, also known as the “war guilt clause,” stipulated that Germany bore sole responsibility for the war and the damage caused. The Treaty itself, and in particular the “war guilt clause,” was perceived by most Germans as too harsh and unjust. In a session of the National Assembly on June 23, 1919, the minutes of which are reproduced here in excerpt, the signing of the Treaty of Versailles and the acceptance of the war guilt clause were discussed. The session was chaired by Gustav Bauer, a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Reich Minister President (the office of Reich Chancellor was only reintroduced after the adoption of the Weimar constitution). Bauer had taken over the office of Minister President at short notice after the government cabinet under Philipp Scheidemann had resigned three days earlier. Bauer himself was opposed to the treaty and rejected the war guilt clause but argued that the treaty must be signed anyway to prevent the threatened resumption of hostilities. The Treaty of Versailles did not create the conditions for lasting peace in Europe. Instead, it caused nationalist resentment in Germany against the Allies and fueled murderous hatred against the German politicians who had signed the armistice and the treaty.

Source

41st session.

Monday, June 23, 1919.

[...]

Bauer, President of the Reich ministry: Ladies and gentlemen! I give you the following message in the name of the Reich government.

In yesterday’s session, the majority of the National Assembly approved my remarks explaining the **Reich government’s** position on the peace treaty. In keeping with this vote and the authorization it expressed, we had a **note** delivered in Versailles yesterday afternoon presenting our position with all due care and reservation and formulating our intention to conclude a treaty as follows:

The government of the German Republic is prepared to sign the peace treaty without, however, recognizing that the German people was the author of the war and without accepting any obligation according to Articles 227 to 230 of the peace treaty.

The envoy von Haniel then received the following **response** late that evening:

Mr. President! The allied and associated powers have examined the note from the German delegation dated today and, given the short time remaining, are of the opinion that it is their duty to respond

immediately. Fewer than 24 hours remain until the deadline by which the German government must make its final decision on signing the treaty. The allied and associated governments have examined all of the German government's suggestions regarding the treaty with the greatest care, they have responded to them with complete frankness and made the concessions that appeared appropriate to them. The last note by the German delegation contains no argument or comment that has not already been considered. The allied and associated powers thus consider themselves duty bound to declare that the time for negotiations has passed. They can accept no modifications or reservations and see themselves compelled to demand an unambiguous declaration from Germany's representatives about their intention to sign the treaty in its final form and accept it in full, or to refuse to sign and accept it. After signing, the allied and associated powers will hold Germany responsible for executing the treaty with all its provisions.

(Hear! hear! and movement.)

Mr. President, please accept the expression of my esteem.

Clemenceau.

This, ladies and gentlemen, fundamentally changed the situation at the eleventh hour, and we stand irretrievably before the terrible choice: to reject or to sign unconditionally.

Yesterday the **Reich government** recommended **signing with conditions**, which found a majority among you. It believed it had to make this final attempt to salvage at least some of the fine ideals that our opponents allegedly aspired to in their fight for humanity. It accepted territorial losses, at the cost of nation and fatherland for millions of Germans; it accepted economic and financial burdens, although they render any work on behalf of their own people and its well-being impossible for decades to come. But it wanted to spare its people one thing: a false, extorted confession of guilt and the exposure of fellow Germans to a tribunal in which prosecutor and judge are one.

Today, all of these reflections are merely theoretical. The Entente has rejected our reservations, it wishes to force us into an admission of guilt, to make us the pursuers of our accused compatriots; we are to be spared nothing, nothing whatsoever. Our enemies want to pile contempt upon servitude!

Ladies and gentlemen! Our hope that we could get through to our adversaries with the sole reservation of preserving our honor was not very great. But even had it been less, we had to make the attempt. Now that it has failed, thwarted by the criminal arrogance of the Entente, the whole world can and must see: A conquered people is being violated here, body and soul, like no people before it.

Ladies and gentlemen! No more protests today, no storm of indignation! Any of this would serve to diminish the terrifying impression presented to the world today, which is staring at this scene of torment with concealed, but in some cases also unconcealed, horror.

Let us sign! That is the recommendation I must make in the name of the entire cabinet. **Sign without conditions!** I shall not sugarcoat anything.

The reasons that force us to make this recommendation are the same ones as yesterday, except that now a deadline of scarcely four hours separates us from the resumption of hostilities. We cannot be responsible for a new war, even if we had the weapons. We are defenseless. But defenseless is not honorless!

[...]

And now, ladies and gentlemen, may I assume that even after these events the government is still

authorized to sign the peace treaty.

President: I cede the floor to Deputy Schiffer (Magdeburg).

Schiffer^[1] (Magdeburg), deputy: The minister president's declaration, which we, however, do not intend to criticize with regard to the authorization resolved by the National Assembly yesterday, gives me occasion to note that it does **not change** our **position on the matter itself**, as I presented it here yesterday. Moreover, I would like to declare that my political colleagues do not doubt the patriotic attitudes and convictions of even those who voted Yes yesterday.

President: I cede the floor to Deputy Schultz (Bromberg).

Schultz^[2] (Bromberg), deputy: I make the following declaration in the name of the German National People's Party:

The German National People's Party retains its **position of unconditional rejection** of the draft treaty presented to us

(Bravo! from the German National People's Party)

and, in maintaining this fundamental standpoint, raises an objection to signing it.

(Renewed agreement from the right. — Shouts from the center and left.)

It takes it for granted that every member of the National Assembly will take his own position, following his own knowledge and conscience.

President: I cede the floor to Deputy Dr. Heinze.

Dr. **Heinze**^[3], deputy: Following the remarks by the minister president, all that remains for me to declare on behalf of the German People's Party is that we, for our part, continue to **reject the peace treaty**. — Naturally we recognize that even those who oppose our view act solely out of patriotic motives.

(Approval from the German People's Party. — Cries of Bravo from the center and left.)

President: Ladies and gentlemen! The minister president has noted that, as he sees it, even after the events he described the government should remain authorized to sign the peace treaty. No objection has been raised to this view.

[...]

Ladies and gentlemen! This brings an end to this painful affair for the time being. I note with satisfaction that various sides of the house have acknowledged that all parts of the house, whether for or against, have voted solely on patriotic grounds, guided by great reservations of conscience and the gravest view of the state of our fatherland.

Ladies and gentlemen! I hope that the spirit that the greater part of this National Assembly has just expressed will also be carried out into our people.

(Bravo!)

It would be absolutely the worst outcome if, after the events of previous decades that are fortunately behind us, we were to indulge in insults and suspicions regarding the patriotic attitudes of our fellow citizens.

(Quite right!)

In this, the German people's most difficult hour, I would consider it the greatest crime that could be committed against us from within.

(Quite right!)

I hope that outside, among the general population, and notably in the press, there will be understanding and a will to take on the incredible burdens that face us peacefully, universally guided by the sacred will of patriotic love. For the rest, we commend our unfortunate fatherland to the protection of our merciful God.

[...]

NOTES

[1] Eugen Schiffer, DDP

[2] Georg Schultz, DNVP

[3] Karl Heinze, DVP

Source of original German text: *Verhandlungen der Verfassungsgebenden Deutschen Nationalversammlung 1919*. Vol. 327, 41st session, June 23, 1919, *Stenographische Berichte*. Berlin: Druck und Verlag der Norddeutschen Buchdruckerei und Verlags-Anstalt, 1920, pp. 1139–52.

Translation: Pam Selwyn

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