

Philipp Scheidemann Opposes the Acceptance of the Treaty of Versailles (May 12, 1919)

Abstract

Although the Armistice of November 11, 1918, had ended the fighting, 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, consent to a trial of Kaiser Wilhelm II, cede territory 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 and especially the “war guilt” clause was perceived by most Germans as too harsh and unjustified. Philipp Scheidemann (1865-1939) had been appointed by President Ebert in February 1919 as Minister President (the office of Chancellor was only reintroduced with the adoption of the Weimar Constitution later that year) and formed a coalition government of SPD, Center and DDP. In his speech before the National Assembly on May 12, 1919, excerpts of which are reproduced here, Scheidemann vehemently opposed the adoption of the peace treaty. However, since the Allies refused to soften the terms of the treaty and threatened to occupy all of Germany and continue the naval blockade if the German government did not ratify the treaty, the majority of his own party spoke out in favor of acceptance. Scheidemann’s cabinet and the other governing parties were ultimately unable to reach a consensus on the issue, leading to the resignation of the entire Scheidemann government on June 20. Two days later, the National Assembly voted 237 to 138 to ratify the treaty.

Source

Ladies and Gentlemen! *The German National Assembly* has convened today, at the turning point of our existence as a people, to take a position, together with the national government, on what our enemies call the terms of peace.

In other people’s rooms, in emergency quarters, where we were, however, just warmly welcomed, the representatives of the nation have come together, much as the last flock of loyal followers bands together when the fatherland is in the direst peril.

Everyone is attending except the people from Alsace-Lorraine, who have already been denied the right to be represented here, just as they will be robbed of the right to vote on their right to self-determination.

When I see among your ranks, side by side, the representatives of all the German tribes and lands, the elected delegates from the Rhineland, the Saar, East and West Prussia, Posen, Silesia, Danzig and Memel, alongside the delegates of those not threatened men from the threatened lands and provinces who, if our opponents’ will becomes law, will meet for the last time as Germans among Germans, then I feel my heart as one with them in this heavy and consecrated hour, above which only one commandment may stand: We belong together!

(Lively Bravo!)

We must stand together.

(Renewed lively approval)

We are a single flesh and blood, and those who seek to separate us cut into the living body of the German people with a murderous knife.

(Renewed tumultuous approval)

Our highest duty is to keep our people alive.

We are not chasing nationalist dreams; the question of prestige and the hunger for power have no part in our consultations. We must save the life, the poor, sheer life of our land and people, today, where each of us feels the strangler's hand at our throats.

Allow me to speak quite without tactical considerations: the basis for our deliberations, this thick book (referring to the conditions of peace), in which one hundred paragraphs begin with "Germany renounces—renounces—renounces," this dreadful and murderous hammer of witches, intended to pressure and extort a great people into professing its own unworthiness and agreeing to relentless dismemberment, enslavement and helotism—

(Very true!)

this book must not become the legal code of the future!

(Tumultuous approval)

A few days ago, I compared the conditions conveyed to us by our opponents with President Wilson's relevant program points. I will not go into this today. Now I know the demands in their entirety, it would seem blasphemous to me to even wish to compare them with Wilson's program, that foundation of the first armistice!

(Lively agreement)

But I cannot refrain from making one comment: Once again, the world has been disabused of an illusion.

(Very true!)

[...]

Ladies and gentlemen! There is a *poster* hanging everywhere in Berlin that seeks to awaken active love for our poor *brothers in captivity*: sad, hopeless faces behind prison bars. That is the proper title image for this so-called peace treaty,

(Lively agreement)

the faithful representation of Germany's future! Sixty million people behind barbed wire und prison bars, sixty million in forced labor, whose own country our foe has turned into a prison camp!

[...]

This treaty is so unacceptable that I cannot yet believe that the earth can bear such a book without millions and millions of voices in every country, regardless of party, crying out: This murderous plan!

Let me begin outside our borders: If the conditions are accepted Germany will no longer be able to call anything its own that lies outside these, its contracted borders. The colonies disappear; all rights from state or private contracts, all concessions and capitulations, all agreements on consular jurisdiction or the like, all of this will disappear! *Germany* has ceased to exist *abroad*! But that is not enough: Germany

has *cables*—these will be taken away. Germany has wireless stations—three months after the peace treaty goes into effect, they may only send commercial telegrams and only under allied control! Thus out of the outside world and cut off from the outside world! We need not picture what kind of business will be done under the control of competitors or opposing parties.

But that is not nearly all: There could be a *German relationship with foreign countries* after all. Thus the Council of Four stipulates:

“Treaties between enemies are considered to be void [...], except those treaties whose execution a government of the allied or associated powers demands within six months in favor of one of their nationals.“

As Wilson says so aptly: “[Only a peace between equals can last.] Only a peace the very principle of which is equality and a common participation in a common benefit!“

Ah, a principle that the Entente wishes to see implemented down to the most minute detail; it puts the finishing touches to its preferred means of erasing Germany from the world using the following measures:

With regard to the *liquidation of enemy property*, *Germany’s war measures* are to be stopped immediately or compensated for.

The allied and associated governments, in contrast, reserve the right to retain and liquidate all property, rights and interests of German nationals on their territory.

(Hear! Hear!)

That is the carceral image presented to the one side, to the rest of the world: without ships, since our merchant navy is being handed over to the Entente, without cables, without colonies, without foreign branch offices, without reciprocity or legal protection, indeed without even the right to participate in setting the prices for the goods we are compelled to deliver as tribute, for coal, pharmaceuticals etc. I ask you: What honest man—I will not even say which German, but only which honest man who respects agreements, can agree to such conditions? What hand must not wither after laying these shackles on itself and us?

(Lively approval)

And we are expected to keep busy, working the slave shifts for international capital, performing sorage for the entire world? Foreign trade, once the source of our wealth, is crushed and rendered impossible for us.

And within *Germany*? The ores of Lorraine, coal from Upper Silesia, potash from Alsace, the Saar mines, the cheap foodstuffs from Poland and West Prussia, all of this is to be outside our borders, around which we can erect no higher tariff barriers than existed on August 1, 1914, but our adversaries can do so at will until they choke the life out of us.

Within our borders we must place at their disposal all *German revenues*, first of all the payments for customs duty. Nothing for our people, nothing for the war invalids and war widows, everything is forced labor, for whose products the buyer sets the prices. France gave us some inkling of how this works when they paid 40 marks a ton for the coal we mined in the Saar Basin and then sold it in their own country and Switzerland for 100 francs.

(Hear! Hear!)

I do not wish to enumerate all the great and small nooses in whose entirety a great people is to be fatally entangled, in keeping with the words of *The Times*:

“If Germany begins engaging in trade again in the next 50 years, then we have fought this war in vain.”

(Lively cries of Hear! Hear! and Fie!)

What is a people to do upon whom the commandment is imposed, “*Germany is responsible for all the losses, damages* that the allied and associated governments and their nations suffered.” What is a people to do that has no say in determining its duties, which however has the opportunity to speak without participating in decision-making? Whose own needs are never considered and whose claims are swept aside with a mere wave of the hand: “Germany pledges not to present any of the allied and associated governments directly or indirectly with any monetary demands for any events that occurred before this treaty went into effect.”

And because all of this bondage and humiliation and robbery perhaps does not suffice to exploit every favorable opportunity for future annihilation, when all is said and done, brazenly to place boot on neck and thumb in eye—openly to assure the miserable enslavement of coming generations: “Germany pledges to introduce and publish all acts of legislation, all provisions and ordinances that may be necessary in order to safeguard the complete implementation of the abovementioned arrangements.”

(Lively cries of Hear! Hear!)

Enough now! More than enough!

Ladies and gentlemen, these are a few examples of the provisions of the treaty, in laying down which, as Mr. Clemenceau informed our delegation yesterday, the Entente consistently followed the principles according to which the conditions of the armistice and the peace negotiations were suggested.

(Lively cries of Hear! Hear! and shouts)

We have made counter-suggestions. We will continue to do so. We regard it, with your consent, as our sacred duty to arrive at negotiations. In the view of the Reich government, *this treaty is unacceptable!*

(Minutes of riotous approval in the house and from the galleries. – The assembly rises to its feet. – Renewed tumultuous Bravos and applause.)

PRESIDENT: Please allow the speaker to continue from now on.

SCHEIDEMANN, President of the Reich ministry: This treaty is so unacceptable that it is beyond me how the earth can bear such a book without millions and millions of voices in every country, regardless of party, crying out: This murderous plan!

(Lively agreement)

Here and there the insight and the shared duty of mankind are awakening. In the *neutral countries*, in *Italy* and *England*, above all also—and this comforts us in this final and most terrible flaring up of a chauvinist politics of violence—above all also in *socialist France*, voices are growing loud that historians will someday use to measure the state of humanity after four years of slaughter.

I thank everyone who speaks from an outraged heart and conscience; above all I thank, and repeat in eternal devotion, the oath of loyalty that rings over to us at this very moment from Vienna.

(Tumultuous Bravos and applause)

Brothers in German Austria who even in our darkest hour do not forget the path to a united people: We send greetings and thanks, and we stand by you!

(Tumultuous approval and applause)

I will not argue with the others for whom the cage is not yet closely woven, narrow and torturous enough, the cage in which the “German beast” is to be locked up. We know our path. It must not lead through these conditions! To do so would mean not to doubt Germany’s future, but to sacrifice this future,

(Lively agreement)

if we wished to think and feel differently.

(Approval)

[...]

If this treaty is truly signed, Germany’s corpse will not be the only one left lying on the battlefield of Versailles. Beside it would lie the similarly noble corpses of the popular right to self-determination, the independence of free nations, the belief in all of the fine ideals under whose banners the Entente professed to fight, and above all the belief in loyalty to the terms of a contract!

(Lively agreement)

A degeneration of ethical and moral concepts would be the consequence of such a treaty of Versailles, signaling the dawning of an age in which, once again, as in those four years, only more insidiously, cruelly, cowardly, the nation would be the murderous victim of the nation, and man would be a wolf to man.

We know and wish to state honestly that this coming peace will be a hard one for us. We do not retreat one iota from our duty, what we have agreed to, what we are compelled to bear. But only a treaty that can be honored, a treaty that allows us to live, that leaves us life as our sole capital for work and compensation, only such a treaty can rebuild the world.

(Lively approval and agreement)

Our signature under such a treaty! Our loyalty to its provisions! All of our power and labor to its conditions!

Not the war but this hard, mortifying *industrial peace* will be the chalybeate bath for our profoundly weakened people!

(Lively agreement)

[...]

We have ceased fighting; we want peace. From the example of our opponents, we see with horror the distortions that the politics of violence and brutal militarism have brought forth. Shuddering, we turn away from years of murder.

To be sure: Woe unto those who provoked the war! But triple woe unto those who now delay true peace by even one day!

(Tumultuous approval and applause)

Source of original German text: Philipp Scheidemann, "Gegen die Annahme des Versailler Vertrages 12. Mai 1919," *Politische Reden III*, ed. Peter Wende. Deutscher Klassiker Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 1994, pp. 254–62.

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