

Reichstag Hearing on the London Demands (March 4, 1921)

Abstract

This transcript of a Reichstag session in early March 1921 highlights the country's concerns that spring over the forthcoming determination of war reparations by the Allies. The Treaty of Versailles had already stipulated in 1919 that Germany pay reparations, but it had not fixed an exact sum, instead entrusting an Allied commission with the task of assessing war damages and then calculating their monetary value. That commission, meeting in London, was nearing the point when it would announce its judgment, which prompted several Reichstag members to insist that Germany be allowed to offer its input before that happened.

The two Reichstag members quoted in this document, Georg Ledebour (USPD) and Paul Levi (KPD) were politically far to the left of the governing coalition, and their statements expressed both a demand that the Reichstag be given a voice in this critical matter and a skepticism that the government was being entirely forthcoming with parliament.

On May 5, 1921, the London Reparations Conference made its assessment public. Here referred to as the "London Demands," but far more commonly known as the "London Ultimatum," the conference report settled on a total war reparations debt of 226 billion gold marks for Germany and the other Central Powers (Austria, Hungary, Turkey, and Bulgaria). Given that the other four had little prospect of paying, however, Germany was essentially saddled with the entire sum—theoretically, at least. The Allies divided the reparations debt into three series of payments, though, and most officials only expected to receive the first two in full. The third series of payments, which represented the bulk of the reparations, existed on paper both as a bargaining chip that the Allies could use with Germany and as something "concrete" with which politicians could appease domestic demands in France, Belgium, and Great Britain that Germany pay "until their pips squeak."

On May 11, the Reichstag voted 220 (for) to 172 (against) to comply with the London Ultimatum, in part because the Allies threatened a full-scale occupation of the Ruhr Region otherwise, and in part because Germany hoped thereby to curry British support for Germany's goal of maintaining control over Upper Silesia, which Poland also claimed.

Germany's acceptance of the London Ultimatum marked the beginning of its pursuit of a highly contentious policy known as "fulfillment," by which some German officials hoped to expose the thoroughly unrealistic and unworkable terms of the reparations precisely by attempting to comply with them to the letter. Such a policy, it was hoped, would cultivate Allied good will and compel a more rational and humane revision of the reparations demands.

Source

75th Session.

Friday, March 4, 1921.

President: The session is declared open.

The minutes of the previous session are available for inspection on the bureau.

Ladies and gentlemen! Before turning to the order of business, I would like to take this opportunity to pass on the following information. With regard to the matter that is currently of utmost concern to us all, namely, the **London negotiations**, I have asked the Reich government whether it is in a position to inform the Reichstag about the current state of affairs. The government has responded that it is unable to do so because it has not yet received all the necessary information from London and because the text of the speech by the English prime minister is still being examined. I should add that I am in constant and close contact with the cabinet and that, based on the information that has just arrived, I will very shortly be able to inform you of the decisive sentences contained in the English prime minister's speech.

We will now move to the order of business.

(Representative Ledebour: A word on procedure!)

With regard to procedure, Representative Ledebour has the floor.

Ledebour, Representative: I regret having to contradict the President, but in our opinion it is absolutely necessary that the Reichstag immediately becomes involved in **negotiations of the London demands**. We cannot wait until the wording of all the statements from the London meetings is available or until the government is in a position to review all this material. The facts that should prompt the Reichstag to present its views on this matter are already clearly in evidence.

(Independent Social Democrats: Hear, hear!)

The speech by the English Prime Minister Lloyd George is also already available in English. Without wanting to criticize the conduct of the government or the opinions it has expressed, based on what we have hitherto experienced we regard it as necessary that the views of the different parties in this house be heard as soon as possible. We see these views as having a far greater effect than statements by government representatives alone. The deadline for the decision expires on Monday, which leaves so little time that if we to wait until the government has completed its deliberations and its representatives have spoken in the Reichstag, any views expressed by this house will come too late.

(From the far left: Hear, hear!)

We must above all endeavor to ensure that the negotiations do not collapse. During the initial phase of negotiations, I described it as highly questionable for one side to portray the proposals of the other as unworthy of discussion. Our side must desist from making such declarations, since they only provide the other side with a pretext for striking back with an even more draconian proposal than the one we are condemning.

For all these reasons, gentlemen, it is in the interest of the entire German people—and particularly of the working classes, who are currently facing a very difficult decision—that we immediately enter into negotiations and place on today's agenda the debate on the Entente's demands and the German government's counter-proposals.

(Applause from the far left.)

President: With regard to procedure, Representative Dr. Levi has the floor.

Dr. **Levi**, Representative: Ladies and gentlemen! We are also of the opinion that this is the time and place for this debate. Even if it is correct—and I am not sure it is—that the text of the speech by Lloyd George is not yet available—

(Interjection: It is available!)

—I say yes, I assume so—it is nevertheless the case that the text of the declaration by the German government is available. We believe that this text alone provides the German Reichstag with a sufficient foundation to formulate its own position.

(United Communists: Very true!)

The issue here is simply whether the Reichstag must continue to limit itself to the role of a dog that is allowed to bay at the rising moon or whether the German Reichstag wants to be a leading political body. If the German Reichstag does want to be a leading political body, it must speak while there is still time to speak and things are in flux rather than only after events have taken place.

(Applause from the far left.)

President: The procedural debate is hereby concluded.

Representative Ledebour has requested that he be immediately permitted to enter into consultations on communications from foreign governments. A representative of our own government will not take the floor to respond since the government has rejected his request.

I would ask those who support the request by Ledebour to rise.

(Representatives rise.)

—That is a minority; the request is denied.

We will now move to the order of business.

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