

“We Have Atoned for Your Guilt”: Matthias Erzberger on the Responsibility for Germany’s Plight (July 25, 1919)

Abstract

Matthias Erzberger (1875-1921) was a central figure in the founding of the Weimar Republic. First elected to the Reichstag as a member of the Catholic Center Party (*Zentrum*) in 1903, Erzberger initially supported Germany’s aggressive pursuit of military victory in the First World War. His position had evolved by 1917, however, into one of advocating for an immediate, negotiated peace. Erzberger led the four-person German delegation that signed the Armistice on November 11, 1918, a necessary and thankless task for which right-wing figures excoriated him ever after. He further stoked their antipathy by later urging German acceptance of the Versailles Peace Treaty as the least-worst option available to the defeated nation, even though he considered many of its terms unduly harsh. All of these efforts made Erzberger a marked man, and on August 26, 1921, a far-right hit squad assassinated him while he was taking a morning walk.

The following three excerpts recount the events of late fall 1918 from Erzberger’s perspective. They come from a far longer speech (14 pages of double-columned text in its transcript form) in which Erzberger forcefully indicted Germany’s conservative establishment for having lost the war; for having squandered earlier opportunities to achieve a more advantageous peace treaty; for having violated human rights in occupied territories, particularly Belgium; and for then having cravenly attempted to foist the blame for all of these crimes and blunders onto those who had led the revolution that finally toppled that establishment in November 1918.

Erzberger delivered his remarks immediately after listening to Karl Albrecht von Graefe, a DNVP representative, deliver a scathing broadside against both the Republic and Erzberger personally. Graefe had accused Germany’s democratic leaders of having caused the country’s military defeat, an early articulation of the bogus “stab-in-the-back myth” (*Dolchstoßlegende*) that blamed politicians like Erzberger for having fatally undermined the German war effort. Graefe concluded his oratorical barrage by requesting a vote of no confidence in the government, which later failed overwhelmingly on July 29 by a vote of 53 in favor and 243 against.

“Is that all?” asked Erzberger sarcastically, in response to Graefe, before then issuing his own fiery declaration: “We will take up the fight with every ounce of determination and ruthlessness, in the interests of our people, against the party that the speaker has represented today.” Erzberger’s ministerial post accorded him access to wartime documents, which he then proceeded to use to devastating effect in debunking the lies and false hopes that military leaders and Conservative politicians had peddled since 1914. Erzberger also drew attention to his own peace resolution (*Friedensresolution*) before the Reichstag on July 19, 1917, which had called on German officials to negotiate an end to the conflict without annexations on either side. Despite gaining the approval of that elected chamber by a vote of 216 to 126, the supreme military commanders Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, who held the real power in Germany at the time, simply ignored it and several subsequent opportunities to achieve peace later that summer. Those missed opportunities, Erzberger insisted, resulted in Germany’s ultimately having to submit to far worse terms in November 1918.

Erzberger nevertheless defended Germany’s reluctant decision, taken just over a month earlier on June 22, 1919, to accept those far worse terms, given that the country had no real alternative. Signing the Versailles Treaty, he argued, had not only brought an end to the unbearable suffering of the German people, but it had also prevented a probable breakup of the country into smaller statelets by the

victorious Entente powers if Germany had not signed. “The peace had to be concluded!” Erzberger exclaimed near the end of his speech; “It had to be concluded in order to save the unity of the Reich.” His clear-headed thinking on this issue however, only further exposed Erzberger to smears and allegations, including from some of his own coalition partners. Defending himself from such allegations constituted yet another objective for Erzberger in what emerged as one of the most highly charged and momentous speeches of the Weimar Republic.

Source

[...]

You keep saying that the turning point came on November 9. No, the turning point came on September 30.

(Very true! in the center, among the German Democrats and the Social Democrats.)

At that time, the party leaders were told – only one member of each faction was present, and he was sworn to secrecy – that it was over, that the military resistance was completely finished, that peace had to be made immediately. One telegram after another was sent from the headquarters to Berlin: if a new government was not formed within the shortest possible time, if peace was not offered that very night, then there was no guarantee that the front would hold out for even 24 hours.

(Hear! hear! in the center, among the German Democrats and the Social Democrats.)

All these things will be made known to the German people in the next few days in the form of documents; then it will be up to them to examine the documents themselves to see whether the assertions that Mr. v. Graefe is still making today are correct, or whether what I am saying is correct. The government of Prince Max von Baden may have made a single mistake, if it was a mistake. It should have sent General Ludendorff and told him: “You conclude the armistice!

(Loud approval.)

We, as a political factor, do not want to bear the responsibility for the military defeat.” Where was the military's civil courage then? They took refuge behind the government and urged it to form a parliamentary government immediately. The gentlemen from the Social Democratic faction will confirm that the Social Democratic Party initially refused to join the government,

(very true! among the Social Democrats)

and that the parliamentary group had already taken such a decision because it said: it is outrageous to make such an unreasonable demand of us, now that everything is lost, to take over the government, since the gentlemen would then come afterwards and say that we, the new government, had brought about the loss of the war.

(Very true! among the majority parties.)

But one thing was decisive. What would have happened if Ludendorff and Hindenburg had had to go to Foch on September 30? – The re-enactment of Sedan, a complete capitulation! And we have saved our people and our army from that; because the army could now be brought back and did not fall into captivity. But everyone can imagine what would have happened otherwise.

(Loud approval from the majority parties.)

[...]

It was on the morning of November 6 that I received the order – I did not push for the conclusion of the armistice, as conservative newspapers repeatedly and untruthfully claim. Every member of the cabinet knows how it suddenly came to me,

(very right! in the center)

— that's where I got the order — I'm saying this openly today — to hoist the white flag on November 8, that is to say to capitulate, and that at the request and with the consent of the Supreme Army Command.

(Loud cries: Hear! hear!)

Mr. v. Graefe dares to say that we are committing a historical lie when we speak of an armistice.

(Shouts from the right.)

What I experienced at the front when I traveled through was deeply shocking. At the last station before crossing over to the enemy, I met a general of great merit who naturally knew little about our internal affairs. I asked him about the conditions at the front, and he said: "I have two divisions, one of which has 437 men

(Hear! hear!)

and the other 349 men.

(Great commotion.)

I keep calling for help, and my poor people are almost broken and get no relief, because there is one to be had from Germany." I asked him: 'How are these few people, who used to be 20,000 strong and should still be, supposed to hold the front at all?' He said: "It is not possible to hold it if the enemy makes a serious push. But it is possible because there is a single man with a machine gun in a hole, in a nest here, and a colonel with a machine gun there, and a major with a machine gun there. But if a large advance comes, then of course the front here will be defeated and breached." And would you have wanted to be responsible, Mr. v. Graefe, for bringing the misfortune of war into the German fatherland, devastating it as it passes through Germany?

(Deputy v. Graefe: I was quoting Hindenburg!)

— And I told you what happened on October 28 and then said what had to happen on November 6 and what my instructions were.

Gentlemen, one more thing. You say that the internal revolution in Germany forced the armistice. I would like to point out, in addition to other events that have been described, the telegram from Field Marshal Hindenburg, in which he expressly telegraphed me from Compiègne:

If these points are not implemented,

— there are 9 points listed —

a conclusion would still have to be reached.

Dated November 10.

(Hear! hear!)

But, gentlemen, for us on the outside and especially for the enemies, the domestic political events in Germany were not at all decisive. After all, the terms of the armistice were not set by Foch alone, since they had long since been set and defined by the Allies. That's why it took five weeks before the first telegram about the armistice was even sent, and that's why it was no longer possible to bring about any further changes. They could have sent anyone they wanted to Compiègne, even Mr. v. Graefe,

(laughter)

— he probably wouldn't have been accepted! —

(laughter)

no one could have achieved a more favorable armistice.

From this historical account of the course of events, I have established the following: firstly, the peace resolution would have been able to succeed if its principles had been applied through an unambiguous policy of denial at the first favorable opportunity, the Pope's peace note.

(Very true! in the center, among the German Democrats and the Social Democrats.)

Secondly, the collapse of Germany was not caused by the revolution, but by the constant deception of the military regarding the extent of what was militarily and politically achievable, and by the blindness to the consequences of the dissolution of the coalition.

It was not the peace resolution that paralyzed the German resistance, but the German collapse was the result of the catastrophic lack of insight into domestic and foreign policy that afflicted the conservatives and the Supreme Army Command, which did not prevent them from intimidating and terrorizing the government and the people.

(Loud approval from the center, the German Democrats and the Social Democrats.)

You are still trying to play this game to this day.

(Renewed enthusiastic approval.)

The patience of the government and the majority parties will soon come to an end.

(Loud approval from the Center and the Social Democrats.)

The reckoning will continue thoroughly.

[...]

To conclude: We majority parties – and I can say this on behalf of the government and the majority parties – we suffer from the defeat just as much as you do, you can be sure of that. The sight of the emaciated children in the big cities, the haggard women, touches us even more.

(Very true! and shouts from the Social Democrats.)

We deplore the fact that the economic development of our country will be severely curtailed for years to come. Hundreds of provisions of the peace treaty are a source of anguish and concern for us. But there is one thing that separates us from you: we do not make a virtue out of necessity, and we do not boast about the obvious. But when you on the right act as if you alone had a heart for the shame and misery of our fatherland, then I call out to you: what offends us just as deeply as the misery and need of our

fatherland is your false play.

(Loud applause from the center and the Social Democrats. — Shouts and noise from the right.)

We have recognized that our people were at the end of their strength and no longer had any resistance of any kind against the military superiority and the hunger, and we had to accept the peace by force because there was no other way out. We have taken responsibility, gentlemen, for what you have done.

(Loud applause from the center and the Social Democrats.)

But what we will never admit is that you are now trying to make us responsible for this responsibility, which is actually your fault, and on top of that you are hypocritically pouring scorn and derision over us.

Every peace treaty is the final reckoning of a war. Those who lose the war lose the peace, and who lost the war in our case? I have proved it to you: those who, time and again, opposed the most obvious possibilities of a moderate and dignified peace with an unreasonable, defiant and criminal stubbornness. You lost the war with your agitation and power games, because you carelessly rejected the peace when it still seemed bearable to the German people. Only because you spurned peace when there was still time, and trampled it to the ground, rejected the settlement that would have maintained the old borders of the Reich,

(Loud approval from the center and the Social Democrats)

we had to sign the other peace. The moral responsibility for the fact that ultimately no better peace was possible lies with those who supported the old government and who fought against the Reichstag's peace resolution in the way I have just described. By having to sign your armistice and your peace, we have atoned for your guilt. You will never be rid of this guilt, even if you wash your hands a hundred times by saying "No". You will not be rid of this guilt, neither before us, nor before history, nor before your own conscience.

[...]

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https://www.reichstagsprotokolle.de/Blatt2_wv_bsb00000012_00474.html

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