CHAPTER XXI

The Treaty of Versailles (1919)

On January 18, 1919, just one day before the elections for the Weimar Assembly, the victorious Allied and Associated Powers opened in Paris the first plenary session of the conference called to re-establish peace in the world. Only the victorious powers were there. There were some who had read history and had learned that at the Congress of Vienna to which France, the defeated power, was invited, the astuteness of Talleyrand, France's representative, often led to his casting the decisive vote. There was to be no repetition of this. Germany and her allies were not allowed any share in the formulation of the new peace. Their function would be simply to receive and accept the treaties presented to them. Not only were the defeated powers to have no voice in the treaty making; the smaller allied powers had little or no voice and were heard only on details which affected them immediately. The treaties were worked out by the five great powers (the United States, Great Britain, France, Italy, and Japan), and even within that group Italy and Japan often absented themselves. The basic decisions were made behind closed doors, and the leaks were relatively few; thus it was not until the first of the treaties was handed to the German delegation in May that Germany and the world at large knew what had been agreed on.

There was very little, therefore, that the German government or the Weimar Assembly could do in the first months of 1919 about the crucial matter of peace. It was of course constantly in their minds, and unquestionably influenced some of the provisions of the new constitution. Germany insisted, whenever she had the chance, that she had accepted an armistice on the basis of the Wilsonian program of 1918 and pointed to the correspondence between Wilson and Prince Max. She felt that the democratic realignment of the nation should influence the Allies, especially Wilson, heavily in her favor. However, she was to learn that the Allies acted as if they were still dealing with the old regime and thus
did severe harm to the cause of democracy in Germany by providing endless ammunition to the antidemocratic elements.

In April the government worked out a program for peace which it considered to be within the Wilsonian framework and not beyond the possibility of German acceptance. Armed with this, a German delegation, headed by Count Brockdorff-Rantzau, traveled upon invitation to Versailles. When they arrived, they discovered that the Allies were not yet ready for them; they were held in a hotel and treated almost as prisoners until the final document was complete.

On May 7, 1919, the completed treaty was handed to the German delegation. Brockdorff-Rantzau was told that he would have no opportunity to discuss the terms orally and that any communication with the conference would have to be in writing. He was further informed that he had fifteen days to obtain the authorization of his government to sign the treaty. One can imagine the surprise and horror with which the Germans read page after page of the ponderous document.

The treaty is extremely long. It is far more extensive in its economic details, military provisions, and annexes than any other such document in history. In general, it falls under five headings: the Covenant of the League of Nations, and territorial, military, economic, and punitive provisions. The Covenant was of only indirect interest to the Germans in 1919 because Germany was not invited to be among the charter members of the League.

Considerable territorial excisions of German territory were made, nearly all from Prussia. Some were outright cessions; in other cases there was provision for plebiscites. The general criterion followed was Wilson's principle of the self-determination of nations, tempered in cases of doubt by decisions against Germany. The treaty called for a plebiscite to be held in Schleswig to carry out the unfulfilled promise made to Denmark in 1864, and as a result north Schleswig was ceded to the Danes. Plebiscites in Eupen, Malmédy, and Moresnet led to the cession of these territories to Belgium. Alsace and Lorraine were to be ceded to France; in fact, they had changed their colors at the time of the armistice. Furthermore, the rich Saar Basin was removed from German jurisdiction and placed under the League of Nations with ownership of the mines and economic control granted to France. After fifteen years the residents of the Saar were to vote on their future from the choice of retention of League status, cession to France, or repossess-ion by Germany. The rearrangement of the eastern border of Germany was a much more serious matter since it raised the centuries-long conflict of Teuton and Slav. The Allies were bound to restore the ancient state of Poland, which had disappeared from the map in the eighteenth cen-
tury. Germany was required to cede to the new Polish republic nearly all the Prussian provinces of Upper Silesia (containing immense industrial wealth), Posen, and West Prussia; there were to be plebiscites in large portions of East Prussia, which resulted in German victories. The cession of West Prussia to Poland, giving her access to the sea at Danzig, drove a wedge between East Prussia and the rest of Germany and constituted the so-called Polish Corridor which was to embitter European international relations for a score of years. The city of Danzig with its surrounding territory was to become a little free city republic under the authority of the League of Nations, with special privileges for port facilities reserved to Poland. The port of Memel with its hinterland in the far east of Germany was to be forfeited to the League; in due course it was granted to the newly established republic of Lithuania. Finally, since the Allies took the position that Germans were not to be trusted to promote the welfare of less developed peoples, all Germany's overseas possessions were to be given to the League to be distributed at the League's pleasure as "mandated" territories. An added restriction provided that there could be no question of a union between Germany and the new little republic of Austria without express permission of the Council of the League.

The military clauses of the treaty began with this statement: "In order to render possible the initiation of a general limitation of the armaments of all nations, Germany undertakes strictly to observe the military, naval and air clauses which follow." The German army was to be reduced to a total force of one hundred thousand men "devoted exclusively to the maintenance of order within the territory and to the control of the frontiers." Of this hundred thousand, not more than four thousand were to be officers. The General Staff was to be abolished. Enlistments were to be for a period of twelve years, while officers were to serve for twenty-five years. This provision was intended to avoid the subterfuge which Prussia had made use of in the Napoleonic period when she trained large numbers of men intensively for short periods. It had the unexpected effect of creating a small but superbly trained nucleus which Hitler was able to expand with little difficulty into the great army of 1939. Germany was refused the manufacture and possession of all poison gas, tanks, and other offensive weapons. She had to limit her munition factories to those permitted by the Allies and close down all others. No import nor export of munitions or arms was allowed. Inter-Allied Commissions of control were to be established to enforce German obedience of these provisions and similar ones relating to naval and air forces. Germany was forbidden any military air force. The navy was to be reduced to no more than fifteen thousand men, of
whom only fifteen hundred could be officers. Germany was not to possess or construct any submarines. She was permitted a token force of small battleships, cruisers, and destroyers, only sufficient to patrol her coast line.

In addition to the strictly military clauses there were some which combined military and territorial restrictions. The Allies proposed to occupy the entire area of Germany west of the Rhine for an unspecified period of time not to exceed fifteen years, dependent on Germany’s fulfillment of the treaty. Even after Allied evacuation of this territory, it was to remain completely demilitarized, stripped of all offensive or defensive armament or fortification. The same was to be true, starting immediately, of a zone extending fifty kilometers east of the Rhine.

The economic and punitive clauses of the treaty go hand in hand. They are based, as is the whole treaty, on the moral guilt of Germany and her allies for the war and all its losses. The Allies chose, probably as a result of Wilson’s high-minded attitude, to penalize Germany not simply because she was defeated militarily, which had usually been sufficient in the past, but because she had committed a frightful crime against humanity. This reasoning is summed up in the most celebrated and disputed clause of the treaty, the so-called War Guilt Clause, number 231. It reads as follows: “The Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.”

Pursuant to this clause, the Allies held Germany liable for all material damage which had been caused, with the understanding that this damage was to include future expenditures arising from the war, such as veterans’ pensions. The powers at Paris were unable to arrive at any sensible and acceptable total for the bill to be rendered. Hence they contented themselves by stating that an Inter-Allied Reparations Commission would be named to report a total German reparations debt by May 1, 1921. Thus Germany was asked to sign a blank check of unknown and certainly immense size.

In the meantime, pending the decision of the Reparations Commission, Germany was to transfer five billion dollars in gold to the Allies to be credited against the future demand. In addition, she was required to forfeit large amounts of goods in kind, including timber, steel, and most of her merchant marine and large passenger ships. Germany’s pre-war commercial treaties were abrogated, and she was forced to grant most-favored-nation treatment to the Allies.
The strictly punitive clauses announced that the Allies proposed to request the queen of the Netherlands to release to them the former German emperor to be tried for high crimes against humanity. This proposal fortunately came to nothing because of the stubbornness and good sense of the Dutch, who refused to deport their political prisoner. The Allies went further and insisted that Germany should turn over to them for trial certain individuals “accused of having committed acts in violation of the laws and customs of war.” These people were to be tried and punished by the Allies, using, if they chose, evidence furnished by Germany herself. This demand was the one which affronted many Germans the most.

When the terms of the treaty were made public, every segment of the German population arose in wrath to condemn them. This “Carthaginian” peace, this “dictate,” seemed a far cry from the reasonableness of Wilson’s original points. From the furthest right Nationalist to the furthest left Independent, the protest rose. There was hardly a clause of the proposed treaty that was not excoriated. The war-crimes trials were impossible insults to German honor, the cessions to Poland meant the delivery of millions of Germans to government by a lower race, the economic provisions were intended by Great Britain simply to eliminate German competition, and so on. Each group outdid the last in expressions of horror. These expressions were not limited to private individuals. Members of the Weimar Assembly filled pages of the minutes with violent statements, and Scheidemann’s government instructed the delegation at Versailles to declare the terms of the treaty unbearable.

While this tumult was occurring in Germany, Brockdorff-Rantzau at Versailles was preparing a reply to the conference. He produced a lengthy document which considered the treaty clause by clause, and pointed out that it was unfulfillable, not in accord with the armistice arrangements, offensive to German honor, etc. The Allies seemed startled and offended that the Germans should react in this way. They gave almost no redress to Brockdorff’s alleged grievances. The only concession of any importance concerned the cession of Upper Silesia to Poland. Instead of outright cession the Allies now agreed that plebiscites might be held in that region, an action which was in fact delayed until 1921. Seeing that it could accomplish nothing further in France, the delegation returned to Weimar on June 18 with a deadline of five days given by the Allies for acceptance or rejection. Brockdorff-Rantzau counseled rejection of the treaty. The matter was now left to the Scheidemann government and to the Weimar Assembly.

At first blush the three government parties were outdone by none in their condemnation of the treaty. Ebert, Scheidemann, and all the leading
Social Democrats were opposed to its acceptance. They had hoped that Brockdorff-Rantzau would be able to achieve major revisions from the Allies; but when the delegation returned with minimal success, the responsible men faced a serious dilemma. They agreed with Brockdorff that the treaty should be rejected, but as responsible men they had to face the alternative. The Allies made it clear that if the Germans rejected the treaty, the war would start again—this time with Allied troops on and even across the Rhine at points, the German army in a state of rapid demobilization, and Germany on the edge of chaos and starvation. If the Allies carried out their threat to invade across the Rhine, it seemed clear that civil war would ensue and then the familiar bogey of Bolshevism hove into view. In spite of these gloomy possibilities, the Social Democrats, the Democrats, and most of the Center were in favor of rejection. In this they were joined by the other parties and also by the military leaders. Hindenburg, still commander in chief, uttered heroic sentiments along the line of “better death than dishonor.”

The first person to take a realistic position and to point out that there was no alternative to acceptance of the treaty, however unpalatable, was Matthias Erzberger. With great difficulty he was able to persuade a good many of his Center colleagues of his position, but even then he insisted that war-guilt and war-criminal clauses must be deleted. As the climax of the crisis approached, it was these requirements that were the hardest to stomach. The government approached the army command to obtain a military estimate of Germany’s fighting potential. Hindenburg admitted freely that although the army might hold its own in the east, the overwhelming Allied strength in the west precluded any reasonable expectation of success in that area. In spite of this, Hindenburg still counseled rejection of the treaty and even spoke of resigning.

The Catholic Center announced its willingness to accept the treaty if the guilt and war-criminal clauses were deleted and some of the economic provisions modified. At this news many of the Social Democrats indicated their willingness to go along, but the Democrats remained adamant in their refusal and both Ebert and Scheidemann still favored rejection. Scheidemann decided to resign as chancellor, and a governmental crisis took place. Finally on June 22 the decision was made to form a government without the Democrats. Gustav Bauer, a former Social Democratic member of Prince Max’s cabinet, became chancellor; Hermann Müller, a conscientious if colorless Socialist who was later to be chancellor, succeeded as foreign minister; Noske remained at the war office; and Erzberger became minister of finance. Bauer announced to the assembly that in his opinion Germany had no option but to accept the terrible treaty in order to avoid bloodshed, civil war, and untold
horror. However, he too held out against the “honor clauses.” He managed to get a vote for acceptance of the treaty on these terms. The Allies replied immediately that they had no intention of altering a word of the treaty and that Germany had now only twenty-four hours to accept. On June 23, with only about eight hours left, Bauer turned once more to the military for advice. As the unhappy task of counseling Emperor William to abdicate had fallen to General Groener, so did the even more unpleasant task of recommending acceptance of the treaty. Groener insisted that Germany had no option in the matter; Hindenburg might persist in his attitude of heroic stubbornness, but Groener as usual took the position dictated by necessity and common sense. In view of this, the assembly met in emergency session and with terrible misgivings voted acceptance of the treaty as it stood. Still, however, the People’s party, the Nationalists, and some of the Democrats and Centrists refused to accept the onus of the treaty. They preferred to shirk the responsibility and thus were able in years to come to protest their pure German honor. With only a few hours left Bauer sent a mournful telegram to Versailles announcing acceptance of the treaty. On June 28, 1919, exactly five years after the murder of Archduke Francis Ferdinand, in the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles, the same room where forty-eight years before William I was proclaimed German emperor, the Germans signed the treaty. Germany was represented by Hermann Müller and Dr. Bell, a Centrist minister.

Even from a perspective of forty years, it is not easy to judge the Treaty of Versailles. For twenty years it remained the source of endless controversy and thousands of pages of polemic. The Germans erected the Kriegsschuldfrage (“war-guilt question”) into almost a religion; in this they were warmly joined by scholars and publicists in nearly every nation, representing every shade of opinion. Right-wing parties in Germany used the treaty much as the Republican party in the United States “waved the bloody shirt” after the Civil War. Whenever he had nothing else to rant about, Adolf Hitler could always attack the “Versailler Diktat,” (“dictate of Versailles”) and excoriate the parties which had voted for its acceptance. The whole of European diplomatic history between the two world wars revolved around the implementation or repudiation of the treaty.

A few things seem to emerge from this cloud of confusion. One is that, given the principle of self-determination as a criterion, the territorial re-arrangements in ethnically confused central Europe were about as sensible as anyone short of an angel could have worked out. Secondly, the failure of the United States to ratify the treaty and join the League of Nations completely obliterated Wilson’s fond hope that as passions
cooled the League might modify portions of the treaty. Thirdly, the whole matter of reparations and the manner in which the Allies, especially France, tried to enforce them led to terrible bitterness and eventual failure, and must be counted as a grievous error. Fourthly, the refusal of the Allies to treat the new democratic Germany any differently from the way it would have dealt with the old militaristic regime led to the discrediting of just those democratic elements in Germany which the Allies should have most welcomed and aided; instead they became saddled with the hopeless responsibility of accepting, and later trying to fulfill, the treaty obligations.

The historian can amuse himself and his readers with judgments made after the fact. However, he must always bear in mind that he is dealing with a specific moment in history, and try to see what that moment demanded of the men who were acting in it. The Treaty of Versailles followed the most intense, poignant, and passionately fought war in history up to that time. It is difficult to see how the treaty could have been much different except in detail. There was bitterness, the desire for revenge, and also an honest longing to build a better world. The complexities of human motivation appear here in a strong light; they render it impossible to make final judgments.

The fact remains that the history of Germany from 1919 to 1939 is very largely the history of the Treaty of Versailles.