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The Treaty of Versailles and the Rise of Nazism

When the guns of August 1914 finally fell silent on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, Germany was in a state of turmoil. Throughout October, while armistice negotiations had proceeded, fighting had continued on all fronts, with the German Army experiencing severe reversals. Units of the Imperial Navy had mutinied at Kiel in early November, setting off a revolutionary movement that spread rapidly to all parts of Germany. On November 8, Bavaria had proclaimed itself a republic. By November 9, the conservative Social Democrats, under the leadership of Philipp Scheidemann and Friedrich Ebert, had secured the resignation of Prince Maximilian's government (which had accepted the Allied armistice conditions) and proclaimed the establishment of the German Republic. A provisional government, consisting of conservative and independent Social Democrats and headed by Ebert, was quickly organized. The left-wing socialists, known as the Spartacus Party and led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, were excluded from the government. On November 10, Kaiser Wilhelm II, whose abdication had already been announced, had taken refuge in the Netherlands.



At this crucial moment in history, the internationalists controlling the governments of the victorious Allied Powers betrayed their own peoples, as well as the German people, by breaking their solemn promises and fastening a cruel victor's peace on defeated Germany. This betrayal, predictably, produced the German outrage and bitterness that paved the way for the rise of Hitler and guaranteed the Second World War 20 years later.

Shortly after the formation of the provisional government, the Spartacus Party, which had been in the forefront of the initial revolutionary outburst, resumed and intensified its agitation for the creation of a Soviet-style regime similar to that of the Russian Bolsheviks. Encouraged by some successes in gaining support in various places around Germany, the Spartacus movement culminated in a Berlin uprising on January 5 in 1919. After considerable fighting and bloodshed, troops of the provisional government succeeded in putting down the revolt on January 15. Liebknecht and Luxemburg were captured and, while in police custody, murdered.



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Elections for a national assembly were held on January 19. On February 6, the national assembly convened at Weimar, and five days later, Friedrich Ebert was elected president of the republic, officially designated the German Reich and commonly referred to as the Weimar Republic.

Over the ensuing months, the political tumult in Germany continued to intensify. The increasing turmoil was mainly driven by three issues: 1) the hardship caused by the continuation of the British blockade of German ports, which included a restriction on the importation of foodstuffs; 2) the nature of the negotiations with the Allied Powers (composed of 27 delegations, led primarily by France, Great Britain, and the United States) being reported out of the peace conference in Versailles, near Paris; and 3) the continuing revolutionary activities of the Spartacus Party, which were marked by several more unsuccessful uprisings.

The conference to draw up a treaty of peace between the German Republic and the Allied Powers opened in Versailles on January 18. People around the world were hopeful that the settlements arrived at would restore world peace on a permanent basis and that the so-called Great War would prove to be, as U.S. President Woodrow Wilson had described it, the “war to end all wars.” The reverse turned out to be the case, however. The Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey, and Bulgaria) had accepted President Wilson’s Fourteen Points as the basis for the armistice, but the Allied powers didn’t follow through. The Central Powers expected the Allied Powers to use the principles of the points as the foundation for any peace treaties, but the other Allies — primarily France — came to the conference with the determination to demand from the Central Powers the entire cost of the war, and to distribute among themselves territories and colonies of the defeated nations according to agreements negotiated secretly during the three years prior to the entry of the United States into the war. At first, President Wilson insisted that the Versailles Peace Conference accept the full program laid out in his Fourteen Points. Finally, in order to secure the support of the Allies for the all-important fourteenth point, which called for the creation of an association of nations (later known as the League of Nations), he abandoned his insistence on some of the other points.

The main business of the Versailles Peace Conference was, of course, to make peace with Germany, but this is exactly where the peacemakers ultimately failed. Admittedly, the task was enormously difficult because passions still ran high and the Allies were not in total agreement on the details. French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau demanded a harsh and vindictive peace, one that would supposedly forever remove the German threat to French security. This was not surprising, given that the bulk of the fighting and devastation on the western front had taken place on French soil. British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, on the other hand, favored a peace of reconciliation. With the capture of the German Navy, the German evacuation of Belgium, and the divvying up of Germany’s colonies, British aims had largely been satisfied. No British territory had been devastated by the war, and British financial experts were already saying that a restored German economy would be necessary for world trade. Britain did not want to keep military forces in Europe, nor did the British welcome the likelihood that France would become the dominant power on the continent, which would probably happen if Germany were too severely weakened. Also, a healthy Germany was considered an essential bulwark against the spread of Bolshevism from Russia.

Clemenceau wanted to take the entire west bank of the Rhine River and establish there, as a French satellite, an autonomous Rhineland republic. He wanted to have Allied garrisons stationed at the major Rhine crossings, and he pressed strongly for breaking up Germany. He also demanded that, in the Saar



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region, France should be granted the French border of 1814 and, as reparation, the right of occupation of that part of the Saar coal basin not included within that border. But the population of the Saar was German, and Wilson was not willing to accept this violation of the principle of self-determination. He was not impressed by the argument that Napoleon had claimed this territory for a short time in 1814. He told Clemenceau, "That was a hundred years ago. A hundred years is a very long time." Clemenceau responded sarcastically, "Yes, a very long time in the history of the United States."

The British and Americans rejected the idea of dismembering Germany. Lloyd George proposed a compromise whereby Germany would keep the Rhineland and the Allied occupation would be limited to 15 years. In exchange, France would be supported by a military alliance with Great Britain and the United States to guarantee her against any future German aggression. Clemenceau reluctantly accepted this proposal. The French Chamber and Senate ratified the treaty, as did the British Parliament. But in the United States, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations did not even present the treaty to the Senate for a vote, and the guarantee to France ultimately fell through. In the end, France got neither the Rhineland republic nor the Anglo-American guarantee of protection.

All this time, at French insistence, the British blockade of Germany had continued. As a result, all through the winter of 1918-1919, the suffering in Germany was severe, and many thousands of Germans, especially children and the elderly, died of starvation, even though the terms of the armistice stated that the victors were to "provision Germany as to be found necessary." At the British War Office, Winston Churchill, who saw the injustice of the blockade, tried his best to get it lifted, but other politicians were more responsive to the mood in the country (and to the mood in France). Finally, the British government unilaterally lifted the blockade on July 12, eight months after the armistice. By that time the bitterness in Germany had greatly increased because it was felt that the continued starvation of a nation that had surrendered was both illegal and immoral.

The peace treaty was presented to the German delegation, headed by Foreign Minister Count Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau, on May 7. Brockdorff-Rantzau immediately rejected the Allied demand that Germany confess to having caused the war, stating, "Such a confession in my mouth would be a lie." But the Allies were in no mood to accept such a response. After all, Great Britain had not violated Belgium's neutrality; Germany had. France had not invaded Germany; Germany had invaded France. And Russia had not declared war on Germany; Germany had declared war on Russia. As a result, the terms of the Treaty of Versailles were harsh. The Alsace-Lorraine region was given back to France without a plebiscite. In addition, France received the Saar for 15 years, after which a plebiscite was to determine its future. Germany also lost some territory to Belgium and Denmark. Austria-Hungary was broken up, and Austria was forbidden to unite with Germany. An independent Poland was created and received a considerable portion of German territory, including a corridor through East Prussia to the Baltic Sea. Danzig became a free city under the League of Nations but with a Polish administration. The city of Memel went to the new state of Lithuania. All of Germany's colonies were taken from her on the grounds that she was unfit to govern non-German populations.

The German Army was limited to 100,000 men, who all had to be 12-year volunteers, which would prevent the buildup of hidden reserves with rapidly trained conscripts. Germany was forbidden to have military aircraft, tanks, or heavy artillery. The German navy was limited to six battleships, six cruisers, 12 destroyers, and no submarines. Allied inspectors, with wide powers of entry, were to police those provisions. In addition, the entire west bank of the Rhine and a strip 50 kilometers (31 miles) wide on



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the east bank were to be permanently demilitarized, with Allied garrisons remaining there for 15 years. The clause of the treaty to which the German Foreign Minister had objected, Article 231, the so-called war guilt clause, stated, "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." Almost all Germans felt that it was an intolerable insult and an injustice.

Article 231, it must be noted, was authored by John Foster Dulles and Norman Davis. Dulles, an ardent globalist and an attorney for one of the leading Wall Street law firms, was a founder of the world-government-promoting Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). He served as chairman of the board for the Carnegie Endowment and as trustee of the Rockefeller Foundation, as well as secretary of state to President Eisenhower. Davis, a founding member of the CFR and its president from 1936-1944, served as President Wilson's assistant secretary of the treasury and under secretary of state. In his 1941 book, *Versailles, 20 Years After*, historian/diplomat Paul M. Birdsall writes concerning the impact of the war guilt clause: "Probably no single item of the Treaty of Versailles has been so useful to Hitler in destroying the morale of his democratic opponents before attacking them." Birdsall was not a conservative or an isolationist; he was, in fact, a confirmed Wilsonian internationalist, and, for around 20 years, an OSS-CIA apparatchik.

The Treaty of Versailles also provided for the trial of German war criminals. This did not refer to German officers or men who could have been accused of atrocities but, rather, to the kaiser and leading politicians and generals, who were to be accused of having caused the war. In the end, little was done to enforce this clause. The Dutch government refused to extradite the kaiser so that he could stand trial, and there was the risk that such a trial could have led to embarrassing revelations.

The economic provisions of the Treaty of Versailles were remarkably harsh. Clemenceau suggested that Germany pay \$200 billion (approximately three trillion 2018 U.S. dollars). In a speech on February 11 in 1918, President Wilson had promised that there would be no punitive damages, although Germany was to pay for all damage to civilian property in the areas she had occupied. Nevertheless, France insisted that Germany be made to pay for the entire cost of the war. Wilson responded:

I feel that we are bound in honor to decline to agree to the inclusion of war costs in the reparation demand. The time to think of this was before the conditions of peace were communicated to the enemy originally. We should dissent publicly if necessary, not on the ground of the intrinsic injustice of it but on the ground that it is clearly inconsistent with what we deliberately led the enemy to expect and cannot now honorably alter simply because we have the power.

Did Wilson truly mean these words? If so, he nevertheless joined the betrayal and agreed to the crushing measures. Although Wilson's sentiments seemed reasonable and fair, the French still got their way. Germany was to make a reparation payment of 20 billion gold marks by May 1 in 1921, as a first installment. The total figure was to be determined later.

When the terms of the Treaty of Versailles were published in Germany, there was a great outcry against it. The Germans claimed that they had been tricked and betrayed, that after they had signed the armistice in good faith and had carried out its provisions, the Allies had then abandoned the Fourteen Points and violated many of them in the peace treaty. Brockdorff-Rantzau chose to resign, rather than



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ratify it, and for weeks it seemed that the war might be renewed. In the end, the German General Staff advised that this would be disastrous, and the German government made a last desperate counterproposal, agreeing to sign the treaty if the war guilt clause and the provision for the trial of war criminals were removed. The Allies were in no mood to bargain and declared that if Germany did not agree to sign the treaty by 7:00 p.m. on June 25, then the Allies would invade Germany. The German government resigned on June 20, and a new government ratified the treaty on the 23rd. The peace treaty was formally signed on June 28, five years to the day after Serbian assassin Gavrilo Princip had murdered Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo, triggering a series of events that led to the outbreak of the Great War in August of 1914. To maximize Germany's humiliation, the signing took place in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, where the German Empire had been proclaimed in 1871, after Germany's victory over France in the Franco-Prussian War.

Few in Germany were as shattered by the announcement of the armistice as a certain lance corporal in the German Army. Although he had been born in Austria, Adolf Hitler had been accepted as a volunteer in the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment since he was living in Munich when the war had broken out. At the time he heard the news of the armistice, Hitler was in a military hospital near Berlin, recuperating from injuries sustained a few weeks earlier when he had been gassed and temporarily blinded. As he later wrote, "Everything began to go black again before my eyes. Stumbling, I groped my way back to the ward, threw myself on my bed, and buried my burning head in the covers and pillows. I had not cried since I had stood at the grave of my mother."

Hitler was certainly not the only soldier to be appalled by the defeat and shocked by the "stab in the back" of the armistice and the proclamation of a new government. But it seemed that for him there was something almost personal about it: Hitler could never speak about the defeat of Germany without succumbing to violent emotional outbursts of hatred. Over and over, for the rest of his life, Hitler would send down a verbal torrent of condemnation and abuse on those "traitors" who had "betrayed the Motherland" and committed "the greatest villainy of the century." This was the "November shame," perpetrated by the "November criminals" who had created what Hitler called the misbegotten "Jew Republic."

Something clicked during his time in the military hospital. It was there at the turn of the year 1918-1919 that Hitler resolved the identity problem that had plagued him during his shiftless years in Vienna and Munich and reached what he called "the most decisive decision of my life." Finally, he now knew who he was and what he must do. He was the leader sent by destiny. He must answer the "voices" that he said he heard, such as that of Joan of Arc, distinctly calling him as he lay in his hospital bed. The voices told him to rescue his Motherland from the Jews who had violated her. In his autobiography, *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), Hitler ends Chapter VII, "With the Jews there can be no bargaining. There can only be the hard either/or. I had resolved to become a politician."

When Hitler returned to Munich in the spring of 1919, the city seemed to be fulfilling the direst predictions of the political pamphleteers. The graceful capital of Bavaria was being taken over by non-Bavarian radicals. Since the armistice, a series of radical regimes that were, in their turn, inefficient, corrupt, and tyrannical had brought so much chaos and terror that the inhabitants of Munich finally called for help from the central government in Berlin. In May of 1919, volunteer bands of soldiers were sent to "liberate" the city and "restore order." These were the so-called *Freikorps* (Free Corps, but they preferred to call themselves "freebooters"). The *Freikorps* brought relative political stability by



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essentially replacing one leftist reign of terror with a different leftist reign of terror.

By the summer of 1919, the *Freikorps* had grown to 500,000 members and had become the most significant political force in Germany. Composed of battle-tested war veterans and radical youths too young to have fought in the Great War, they entered the service of the Weimar Republic not because they respected the German government, but because they needed money, food, and comradeship, and wanted to exploit an opportunity to fight against and destroy opposing movements. Even though Adolf Hitler was a relative unknown at this point, the *Freikorps* would ultimately become the greatest source of personnel and spirit in Hitler's future National Socialist (Nazi) movement.

The chief characteristics of the *Freikorps* were the same as those of Hitler's later storm troopers. First, the *Führerprinzip* (leader principle), which had been developing in the pre-war youth movements, was now manifested at two levels: The commander of an individual corps was often called the *Führer* and idolized as the embodiment of all soldierly virtues, and the leader was also an abstraction, that is, a 20th-century version of the Barbarossa legend. This is illustrated in a letter one *Freikorps* member wrote to his sister: "Someday a Man will come to lead us, a Man who unites German spirit and German power!" Second, these men carried a reckless desire to smash the whole materialistic, middle-class world. Third, *Freikorps* members were racists and, in particular, rabidly anti-Semitic. Fourth, *Freikorps* fighters dreamed of a new Germany, a Third Reich, in pursuit of which they exhibited their utter contempt for humane values and their exaltation of power and brutality.

Meanwhile, the future *Führer* of the Third Reich stayed in the background, hesitant and unsure. He did not yet know how to proceed in playing the role that he believed destiny had assigned to him. As would often happen in moments of personal crisis, Hitler was overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety, inadequacy, and self-doubt. Month after month, as the turmoil of revolution, radical governments, and *Freikorps* occupation swirled around him, he stood aloof, unsure of what to do. But through it all he was sustained by the conviction that somehow, someday, he would become leader of Germany. He simply had to keep the faith and wait for fate to guide him. And soon it did.

Hitler's first course of action led him back to the army. He was assigned to a special new department, which had been established to investigate eccentric or seemingly subversive political groups. His job was to act as an undercover agent and report on "reliable" and "unreliable" political movements. As part of his training, Hitler was required to attend a series of indoctrination lectures given by patriotic professors at the University of Munich. After one of the lectures, an instructor later reported that he noticed that "the men seemed spellbound by one of their number who was haranguing them with mounting passion in a strangely guttural voice. I had the peculiar feeling that their excitement derived from him and at the same time they, in turn, were inspiring him." The professor was so impressed that he recommended that Hitler be assigned to promote patriotism in the army. Hitler reveled in the recognition that he was a superior orator and in the realization that he could excite crowds through his public speaking.

One day in September of 1919, either because his job as an army informer required it or, as he preferred to believe, fate had directed him to do so, Hitler investigated the meeting of a struggling racist group founded by a railway mechanic named Anton Drexler. The little group, which called itself the German Workers' Party, had gathered in the back room of a tavern. The boring meeting droned on until the newcomer rose in anger to respond to a professor who had suggested that Bavaria should break away from the German Reich. So passionate and effective was Hitler's rebuttal that the deflated



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professor left the meeting. Drexler was impressed and, a few days later, Hitler joined the German Workers' Party. In less than two years, thanks to the force of his personality, his organizational ability, and his capacity for ruthless political infighting, Hitler would become the undisputed leader of the newly named National Socialist German Workers' Party.

As a consequence of both the material losses suffered during the war and the harsh treatment directed at Germany by the nations that had defeated her, the period following the creation of the Weimar Republic was one of ceaseless economic and political chaos in Germany. After France determined that Germany had defaulted on its reparations payments, it began a military occupation of the Ruhr district, where Germany's heavy industries were concentrated, in January of 1923. This merely served to accelerate the economic depression into which Germany was already sinking, and further fueled the monetary inflation that was ruining the middle class. The very class of people who would have been the backbone needed to support a democratic republic in Germany was being wiped out by the developing hyperinflation, which allowed the enemies of the Weimar Republic to increase their power. The rage and humiliation caused by the French occupation of the Ruhr was a godsend to both the Nazi and communist extremists.

In Munich, two political leaders vied for the support of the *Freikorps*: Gustav von Kahr, an uninspiring bureaucrat who had just been made state commissioner general of Bavaria, and the dynamic Adolf Hitler. For weeks Hitler talked loudly and often about overthrowing the government of "Jewish traitors" and "November criminals." The *Freikorps* took him seriously and wanted action. Kahr did not want a revolution, but needed *Freikorps* support for his program of restoration and could not let them gravitate to Hitler. He invited the leading nationalists in Bavaria to a meeting to be held on November 8 in 1923 in Munich. Hitler decided that this would be the moment to act, as destiny seemed to be calling him.

As the dignitaries sat around the tables of the Bürgerbräukeller, a high-class beer hall, listening to Kahr's dull presentation, they were startled by a commotion near the center of the hall. Ridiculously dressed in a morning coat (formal attire), Hitler had jumped on a table and fired two shots into the ceiling. He then rushed to the stage and, at pistol point, herded Kahr and two other leaders into a side room, where he ordered them to join him in a national revolution. Returning to the hall, Hitler launched into a speech that electrified the crowd of 3,000, announcing that a war hero, General Erich Ludendorff, would lead a march on the center of the city the following morning.

The march turned into a fiasco when the Bavarian Provincial Police opened fire on the revolutionaries, killing at least 20 people. Hitler was arrested and put on trial for high treason during February and March of 1924, but a sympathetic judiciary allowed Hitler to turn the proceedings into a veritable circus. Almost overnight the obscure street agitator became a national hero and a martyr to the cause of a resurgent Germany. After serving less than nine months of a five-year sentence, Hitler was released from prison in December of 1924. In less than nine years, he would fulfill his destiny and become supreme dictator of Nazi Germany.

Photo: AP Images



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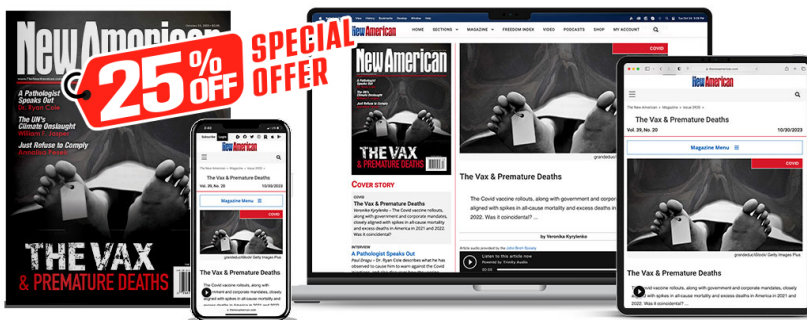
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