

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 211

“1919 – Germany II”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

It is easy to say what should have been done, but more difficult to have found a way of doing it. To those who are saying that the treaty [of Versailles] is bad and should never have been made and that it will involve Europe in infinite difficulties in its enforcement, I feel like admitting it. But I would also say in reply that empires cannot be shattered, and new states raised upon their ruins without disturbance. To create new boundaries is to create new troubles. The one follows the other. While I should have preferred a different peace, I doubt very much whether it could have been made, for the ingredients required for such a peace as I would have were lacking at Paris.

Colonel Edward House, reflecting on the Paris Peace Conference.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 211. 1919: Germany, part two.

Last week, we traced the story of the German Revolution from the abdication—perhaps we should say deposition—of Kaiser Wilhelm to the elections for a National Assembly, where a three-party coalition formed a government and drafted a new constitution for a German republic.

Because of the unrest and violence in Berlin, the National Assembly met at first in the town of Weimar, and so we refer to the “Weimar Constitution” as creating the “Weimar Republic.” And that three-party coalition is known as the “Weimar Coalition.” It was made up of the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, and the German Democratic Party, who collectively held a substantial majority of the seats in the National Assembly. They elected Friedrich Ebert the first President of the new republic, and Philipp Scheidemann the first prime minister. Or Minister-President, to be technically correct, although the office will shortly be renamed to the more traditional title Chancellor, so let’s just use that title from now on.

I told you last time that the Armistice and the long delay before the Allies convened the Paris Peace Conference bought the new German government vital breathing room to get its house in order domestically before it needed to take on questions of foreign relations. The Allies were running the world now. All Germany needed to do was wait until the Allies convened their conference, worked out their internal differences, and then invited Germany into the talks.

So what did Ebert and his government expect from the Allies? This may surprise you. The new German government was actually feeling pretty good about itself and Germany's position in postwar Europe. The view of most in the government was that Germany had dodged a bullet. It had successfully threaded the needle and persuaded its bitter enemies in the West to end the bitter conflict and engage Germany instead under the principles of Wilson's Fourteen Points which, to the members of the Weimar Coalition, didn't sound that much different from the language of their own Reichstag Peace Resolution of 1917: peace without annexations or indemnities.

It's important to remember that the outcome of the Great War was very much in doubt for the first four years, from August 1914 to July 1918. It was only in those last three months of the war that the conflict turned decisively against Germany. This was particularly true if you were a German civilian. German civilians had become accustomed to hearing confident predictions of a crushing victory that would leave Germany the world's leading power and the master of Europe. Even the civilian politicians in the Reichstag were only barely more knowledgeable about what was being discussed between the Kaiser and the High Command than were ordinary Germans.

It came as a shock to many in Germany in October 1918, when it became public that the Kaiser's government was in talks with the Wilson Administration on ending the war. But this was Woodrow Wilson, he of the Fourteen Points, the man who had touted his formula, "peace without victory." Remember that in October, Wilson had effectively presented Germany with an ultimatum: Keep the Kaiser and his dishonest and untrustworthy government and military, and we will have no choice but to fight on until your surrender is unconditional, or, if we can deal with a democratically elected government that represents the German people, we are prepared to discuss a peace based on the Fourteen Points.

And Germany had chosen the second option, by deposing the Kaiser and democratizing. And the Allies stopped the war. Remember when Wilson said that America's quarrel was with the Kaiser and his government and not with the German people? Well, the Kaiser and his government were gone now, and we are the German people. Yes, the government understood that Alsace-Lorraine would have to go back to France and some kind of reparations would have to be paid. But that was small beer, compared to what Germany might have expected.

Meanwhile, on the Eastern front, Germany had won an outright victory over Russia. What remained of Russia was fragmented and dissolving into civil war and chaos. New states were

emerging in the east, like Finland and Poland and Czechoslovakia, states that would likely seek amicable relations with Germany, out of sheer self-interest and wariness of a resurgent Russia.

In short, as I suggested last week, you could score the Great War like this: In the East, Germany wins decisively. The Russian Empire is no more. In the West, at best a draw, at worst some small concessions to the Western Allies that would be more than outweighed by the neutralization of Russia and Germany's new freedom of action in the East.

It could have been worse. It could have been a lot worse.

The German historian and theologian Ernst Troelsch called this period of time, from the Armistice into the early days of the Paris Peace Conference, "the dreamland of the Armistice period." You and I know that the German government was dreaming. Some politicians and officials in the German government were paying closer attention to what the Allies were saying among themselves, such as David Lloyd George's election campaign threat to "squeeze Germany until the pips squeak." But they were a minority.

Over in the Allied nations, the military and political leadership were all too aware of the fact that the status quo post-Armistice left Germany with considerable advantages. No one saw this more clearly than Marshal Foch and Prime Minister Clemenceau, the military and political leadership in France. Both of these men's careers spanned two wars with Germany, the 1870 Franco-Prussian War and the Great War, and both of them approached the peace negotiations with the conviction that preventing a third war of German aggression had to be their top priority.

I've mentioned before the striking demographic disparity between France and Germany. In 1871, the newly created German Empire had a population of about 41 million versus 36 million in France, making Germany about 10% larger than France by population from the word go. But more than that, French population growth was curiously slow from 1871 to 1914, especially compared with Germany. Then both nations suffered the loss of more than 10% of their male populations during the Great War, enough that both experienced overall population declines during the war years. More than that, the loss of these men inevitably meant that the next generations of French and German children would be smaller than they would have been absent the war.

But this demographic "hit" was bound to impact France more severely than Germany. In 1919, Germany's population was about 63 million, about 50% larger than it was in 1871, while France's was only about 39 million, only slightly larger than in 1871, and only about 60% of the population of Germany. Even worse, from the French point of view, there was no reason to expect France's slow rate of population growth to increase anytime soon, especially given all those young men France had lost. Therefore, Germany can be expected to maintain its population advantage over France for the foreseeable future.

The difficult and unspoken truth about France in the Great War is that France did not so much *win* as *survive*. If France had stood alone, it would certainly have fallen. But France had Russia. And by the time Russia began to collapse, the British Army was large enough to pick up the slack on the Western Front. And by the time the British were stretched to their limits, the Americans came charging in, in numbers that would have been hard to imagine just a couple years earlier. France survived because there was always somebody there bailing them out.

The demographic disparity between France and Germany aside, you also have to consider the even larger economic disparity between the two. Germany had a much larger industrial economy than France, and the German industrial sector was modern, efficient, and technologically superior. That Germany was able to fight the war as long and as effectively as it had was proof enough of German industrial strength. Very little fighting had actually taken place inside the borders of Germany, meaning German industry and infrastructure had escaped the Great War unscathed. Once a peace agreement was in place, German industry could just pick up where it left off before the war began.

French industry, by contrast, had been ravaged by the war. A disproportionate share of French industry had been located in the region occupied by Germany during the war. The Germans had looted French factories, shipping valuable equipment and machinery back to their own country. France's best coal and iron ore lay in the occupied regions, and although the terms of the Armistice had required the German Army to withdraw quickly from French territory, the Germans had still found the time to flood French mines and collapse the mine tunnels before handing them back. France was years away from building its industry back even to the prewar level.

Germany in 1919 was unquestionably a weaker nation than it was in 1914. On the other hand, in 1914, Germany was hemmed in by three competing large continental powers: Austria, Russia, and France. The Germany of 1919 no longer has an Austrian or Russian Empire to contend with. Only France remains. Thus in relative terms, even after defeat the Germany of 1919 is a more formidable continental power than it was in 1914.

The unpleasant but indisputable reality facing Georges Clemenceau and Ferdinand Foch in 1919 is this: Despite losing the war, Germany remains a larger and richer nation than France with a greater military potential, and nothing is likely to change any of this in the foreseeable future. France will remain under the threat of a resurgent and vengeful Germany.

Unless something is done at the Paris Peace Conference. What could be done? There are two possible solutions. One would be to weaken Germany. The most obvious way to do that would be to undo German unification and break Germany apart into smaller states, which had been the situation in Central Europe for a thousand years. The other way would be a system of military alliances under which other powers would commit themselves to defend France in the event of a third war with Germany.

This idea of breaking Germany apart into smaller states was a non-starter. Woodrow Wilson didn't like it because it violated the principle of self-determination. David Lloyd George didn't like it because the disintegration of Germany would leave France as the dominant power on the European continent. Britain and France may have been allies for the past twelve years, but they were rivals for the previous millennium, so don't overlook that. British policy toward Continental affairs has always been to prevent any one nation from becoming the dominant land power in Europe. The British wouldn't be any more comfortable with France in that role than they would be with Germany.

But if dismembering Germany was off the table, enlarging it was certainly way off the table. I mention this because the question came up in connection with German-speaking Austria, which we discussed back in episode 178. In 1919, with the Austro-Hungarian Empire splintered into smaller nations, no one could say with any confidence that German Austria could become a viable nation. If you had conducted a plebiscite in German Austria in 1919, unification with Germany would likely have won by a wide margin. But not even Woodrow Wilson was prepared to push self-determination that far. A post-war Germany combined with German Austria would have created an even-larger Germany of French nightmares. So the Treaty of Versailles would include a provision specifically forbidding unification between Germany and Austria unless it was approved by the League of Nations.

Postwar Germany would in fact have to accept some territorial losses. The two biggest ones we have already discussed. The Polish-speaking regions in eastern Germany would become part of the new Poland, including the majority German-speaking Polish Corridor, and the city of Danzig would become a free city administered by the League of Nations. Self-determination does not come into play here; these were specific demands included in the Fourteen Points. And Alsace-Lorraine would be returned to France, another specific provision of the Fourteen Points, and never mind that a plebiscite held in Alsace-Lorraine would likely have returned a majority vote for its remaining part of Germany. That was deemed irrelevant, given that the Germans had ruled over the region for the past 38 years.

There would only be small adjustments to German borders otherwise. A sliver of territory known as Eupen-Malmedy would be ceded to Belgium and after a couple of rounds of plebiscites, the predominantly Danish-speaking portions of the Duchy of Schleswig would be ceded to Denmark. Control over Schleswig and Holstein had been a matter of dispute in the 19th century, with the territories ultimately coming under Prussian and then Imperial German rule. After the war, the political unrest in Germany had produced German violence against ethnic Danes in Schleswig, which led to Danish protests at the Paris Peace Conference, which led to the plebiscite and the new border.

And then there was the question of the Rhineland. The Rhineland is the German lands west of the Rhine River but east of Lorraine. Farther south, or upriver, the Rhine forms the actual border between Germany and Alsace. The Rhineland is a major source of coal and minerals for

Germany and a major industrial region. The Rhine River itself is a valuable transportation link and a powerful German national and cultural symbol. The terms of the Armistice had required Germany to withdraw its military from the Rhineland and permit Allied occupation of the region, for the very real and militarily significant reason that the Rhine would have made an excellent defensive barrier for Allied armies should armistice talks fail and Germany restart the war.

A lot of people in France, including Marshal Foch, who had a lot to do with setting the armistice terms, wanted the Rhineland to go to France. Let's make the Rhine River the new border between France and Germany. It would give the French a strong, defensible front line against any future German attack.

The British and especially the Americans were very much unhappy with this French proposal. Their greatest fear was that this was Alsace-Lorraine in reverse, that the Germans would spend two generations seething over the annexation of the Rhineland, nursing their grudges and, in the end, fighting another war to get it back. A very destabilizing notion, they thought.

The French argued hard. The Rhine was the traditional, natural boundary between France and Germany. Ever since the days of the Roman Empire, when the river had marked the line between civilization and barbarism. The people of the Rhineland were largely Catholic and had been notably reluctant to submit to Prussian rule, they noted. And the Rhinefolk drink wine, like civilized people, not that fizzy brown stuff the Germans love so much. What more evidence do you need that the region is culturally French?

Yeah, no. The other Allies wouldn't go for that one. So the French suggested an independent Rhenish state that could serve as a buffer between Germany and France, in much the same way as Belgium. They proposed formulas under which the Rhineland would be in a customs union with France, while remaining legally part of Germany. In the end, the most the French could get their allies to agree to was a phased Allied withdrawal from the Rhineland in three five-year stages, ending in complete withdrawal by 1935, this withdrawal tied to Germany upholding its own treaty commitments. A portion of the Rhineland, the Saar River valley, known as Saarland, would be governed directly by the Allies for 15 years as a League of Nations mandate, after which a plebiscite would be held on whether the residents of Saarland wished to return to German rule.

This was important for the French economy. Remember that the Germans stripped French factories during the war and wrecked French mines during their withdrawal. Part of the idea here is that the French would gain the use of the Saarland's mineral wealth and manufacturing capacity for a period of time, allowing France the opportunity to rebuild its own mines and factories.

David Lloyd George proposed to the French that instead of the Rhine border they coveted, that Britain and the United States would guarantee the French border against any future German aggression. Clemenceau accepted this alternative, and a Treaty of Guarantee was proposed and

approved by the British Parliament. Unfortunately for the French, the United States Senate refused to approve this treaty, just as it refused to approve the Treaty of Versailles, and since the British commitment was contingent on an American commitment, the US refusal nullified the entire agreement. In the end, France would get neither its Rhine border nor its Allied guarantee.

[music: Beethoven, *Symphony No. 2*]

You'll recall that one of the terms of the Armistice was that the Allied blockade of Germany would continue. Consequently, the food situation in Germany remained dire into the first months of 1919. The German government pleaded for an exemption for the import of food; even that was controversial among the Allies. Some Allied leaders feared Germany would take advantage of the opportunity to rebuild its stockpiles of food and then restart the war.

But the hardships in Germany were undeniable. German food rationing was still limiting most Germans to 1,500 calories per day. The Germans put out statistics showing that some three-quarters of a million German civilians had died of starvation. These figures were likely exaggerated but not entirely false. Allied military personnel on occupation duty sent back disturbing reports of malnourished children. And there was fear that mass starvation in Germany might bring down the nation's fledgling elected government and lead to a Bolshevik-style revolution.

The Allies then offered to permit food imports to resume, provided they be carried on German merchant ships. The German government resisted this proposal. Germany had many merchant ships sitting in port since 1914, but the government feared that releasing the ships might mean they would be confiscated by the Allies, perhaps as reparations, which would make it impossible for Germany to restart the war, because yes, even in early 1919, some in the German leadership were hoping to keep open the option of restarting the war. But by March, with domestic unrest still a problem at home, the Germans agreed to the Allied terms, and food shipments began again.

Speaking of ships, one of the many, many questions facing the peace conference was what to do with the German Navy. Per the terms of the Armistice, the German Admiralty handed over its ships to the British to be interned pending a final decision on what to do with them. The Allies had a pretty clear idea of the fate they had in mind for the U-boats. In the aftermath of so many sinkings of civilian vessels, including passenger ships like *Lusitania*, the Allies still regarded submarines as particularly cruel; like poison gas, they went beyond what a civilized society should permit, even in time of war. Germany's U-boats were studied, but mostly they were scrapped, amid a general sentiment of "Good riddance!"

The German High Seas Fleet was another matter. It had been interned at the British naval base at Scapa Flow, where miserable German crews maintained their ships. The British did not permit German sailors to leave their ships and their food and supplies had to be brought in from Germany. Morale was nonexistent, and the maintenance on the ships mostly theoretical.

The trouble was, even among the Allies, there was no agreement on what to do with this German fleet. These were modern and powerful ships, but therein lay the problem. They had been designed and built for German needs, mostly to patrol the North Sea. They would require expensive refitting to be useful for any other mission. One popular proposal was that the ships be divided proportionally among the Allies according to their war contributions. The difficulty here was the emerging naval competition between the UK and the US. The Americans were threatening to build up the US Navy to parity with the Royal Navy, while British leaders vowed they would do whatever it took to keep theirs the world's pre-eminent naval force. Adding powerful new ships to both navies seemed like a formula for exacerbating the arms race. Ironically, the same German fleet that had triggered one naval race for the Royal Navy now threatened to trigger a second one.

David Lloyd George's pet idea was to tow the entire High Seas Fleet to the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and ceremoniously scuttle every ship. He felt that would make a powerful statement of principles in the new postwar world. When the other Allied powers, France, Italy, and Japan, objected, Lloyd George modified his proposal to agree that the ships be divided among the Allies, but the British would scuttle their share of the fleet, provided the Americans would do the same.

In the end, the decision was taken out of Allied hands. In June, while the German government was balking at the proposed treaty, the German commander of the interned fleet secretly ordered his crews to fire up their ships' boilers, take them out of port, and scuttle them. The Germans did exactly that, surprising the British and evading attempts to stop them. All but one of the German battleships and a good share of the smaller ships were scuttled at Scapa Flow. For the Germans, it was a little touch of soothing ointment on their wounded pride. Scuttling the fleet was better than surrendering it. The Allies weren't too terribly unhappy with this outcome, as it solved their little problem of what to do with all these warships. It was probably for the best.

There was also the question of war crimes. We touched on this subject when we reviewed postwar Turkey, where the prospect of trying senior Ottoman military leaders for the Armenian genocide and other war crimes was raised, but never fulfilled. The same was true with regard to Germany. There was ample evidence of German forces committing what we today would call war crimes or crimes against humanity in occupied Belgium and France. There were also the Allied propaganda stories, which went far beyond the actual crimes and told lurid tales of Allied soldiers crucified and babies bayoneted. These stories did the Allies more harm than good, in the end, by causing the public to doubt all the stories of German atrocities, even the ones that were true.

And ever since the war began, the principal target of Allied propaganda was the German Emperor, Wilhelm II. For four years, the Allied governments depicted Germany as an iron-fisted, autocratic state bent on crushing democracy and ruling the world in a plot masterminded by its Kaiser. As you know, in the final days leading up to the Armistice, when revolution was

breaking out in Germany, the Kaiser was in Belgium at army headquarters. He spoke of marching his army home to Berlin to crush those who dared rebel against his rule. Once he learned that the soldiers of “his” army were largely sympathetic to the revolution and more likely to turn on him than follow him, he fled to the Netherlands.

The Netherlands was his only real option. With hostile Allied armies in front of him and hostile German armies at his back, a quick trip sideways into neutral territory was the only other choice available. The Dutch Queen Wilhelmina was a relative, as were most European royalty, and the Dutch granted Wilhelm asylum. The Queen and the Dutch people had no particular sympathy with the British. They still remembered the Anglo-Boer War and the subsequent British annexation of the independent Boer states, descendants of Dutch colonists. The Dutch were neutral during the Great War, but they suffered from the food shortages as even neutral nations did. The hardships in the Netherlands were compounded by the estimated one million Belgian refugees who had fled to the country during the war and again by the Royal Navy, which strictly limited imports into the Netherlands lest the Dutch pass anything on to Germany.

Relations between the Netherlands and Germany were not always cordial, either. There’s a story, possibly apocryphal, that in the pre-war days when Kaiser Wilhelm was trying, and failing, to impress other European leaders, he boasted to Queen Wilhelmina that his soldiers were seven feet tall. She is supposed to have retorted that when the Dutch open their dikes, the flood waters are ten feet deep.

Despite this, Wilhelm was granted asylum in her country. The Allies exerted diplomatic pressure on the Netherlands to hand the ex-Kaiser over to them for trial, but the Queen stood firm and the Allies, having spent the last four years casting themselves in the role of defenders of the rights of small nations, could hardly have resorted to the use of force.

There were mixed feelings on the Allied side about trying Kaiser Wilhelm. Some wanted to see him hang. David Lloyd George envisioned exiling him to the Falkland Islands. But many, including most American officials, didn’t see Wilhelm as the real source either of German militarism or of the sometimes barbaric conduct of the German military in the occupied territories. And they were probably right about that. Wilhelm was certainly a blustering man-child who personified all of Imperial Germany’s worst characteristics, but he was also more a figurehead than a leader for the cabal of German soldiers and ministers who actually took their nation into the war in 1914.

All right, then; if not the Kaiser himself, how about some of his subordinates? The Allies wanted to try some German military commanders, but Germany balked at handing them over. Eventually, it was agreed they would stand trial in Germany. A series of trials was held in the city of Leipzig in 1921 for twelve relatively low-ranking commanders, most of whom were exonerated or punished only with short prison terms. To give one example, a U-boat commander who had knowingly sunk a British hospital ship in the Mediterranean was acquitted on the

grounds that the German government had believed the British were using hospital ships for military purposes and given submarine commanders permission to fire on them. The commander therefore, according to the court, had reason to believe his action was lawful.

As was the case with the Ottoman trials, the concept of war crimes trials was still novel and was resisted by the Germans and the Turks who saw it either as victors' justice or a propaganda exercise, not a good faith attempt to establish a new body of international law. On the Allied side, the efforts were seen as a failure. But even so, the principle had been articulated and the groundwork laid. Even if the guilty went unpunished today, perhaps a precedent had been set for a more effective effort after some future war.

Okay, we've covered some of the Allied treaty demands. There were more, but we'll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Daniel for his donation, and thank you to Nick for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Daniel and Nick help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to everyone who has helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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If you're looking for something new and different in the world of history podcasts, check out *The History of Sex*. If there's one constant in the history of sex, it's that everyone thinks that norms around sex were clear-cut and universally observed until just a few years ago. Only, they weren't. This was as true in 1919, or in 919, as it is today, but somehow we keep forgetting. We need someone to set us straight, and *The History of Sex* is here to help.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue the story of Allied treaty demands, because the Allies certainly aren't finished yet, and so neither are we. Reparations, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Ever since the 1850s, steel has been manufactured by a process that uses large amounts of air or atmospheric oxygen. From 1945 to 1963, the year when the Partial Test

Ban Treaty was signed, over five hundred nuclear explosions were detonated in the Earth's atmosphere, most of them by the United States and the Soviet Union. These explosions added significant amounts of radioactive particles into the air, including cobalt-60. Steel manufactured during this period and for a long time afterward would therefore become contaminated with this radioactive cobalt-60 residue.

This was a problem for the manufacture of sensitive instruments to detect radioactivity, especially in medical and scientific applications. As a result, manufacturers of those instruments sought out sources of steel manufactured before 1945, because that steel does not bear the cobalt-60 contamination. A principal source of this so-called "low-background steel" was old warships, including the scuttled German High Seas Fleet at the bottom of the North Sea.

I am happy to be able to tell you that since the signing of the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963, atmospheric levels of cobalt-60 have declined significantly, to the point that the demand for special low-background steel is not as great as it used to be. I should also note that in the 1960s and 1970s, when that demand was highest, there were many other pre-1945 warships available for salvage, not just the ships of the former High Seas Fleet. But it's become a popular tale to tell that the steel from those old German battleships has in many cases been recycled into modern medical equipment that saves lives, and also into space probes, especially NASA's Voyager One and Voyager Two, both of which were launched in 1977.

It makes a fine tale to tell, that bits of the sunken High Seas Fleet are now saving lives and drifting through space, exploring the universe, but this is a bit of an exaggeration. Most of that steel came from other sources, although there is a kernel of truth to the story. For the record, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration states that it cannot confirm that any of that Great War German battleship steel ever found its way into one of their spacecraft. But they aren't denying it, either.

[music: Closing Theme]