

Leader of the German Peace Delegation Count von Brockdorff-Rantzau's Letter to Paris Peace Conference President Georges Clemenceau on the Subject of Peace Terms, May 1919

Mr. President:

I have the honour to transmit to you herewith the observations of the German delegation on the draft treaty of peace.

We came to Versailles in the expectation of receiving a peace proposal based on the agreed principles. We were firmly resolved to do everything in our power with a view of fulfilling the grave obligations which we had undertaken. We hoped for the peace of justice which had been promised to us.

We were aghast when we read in documents the demands made upon us, the victorious violence of our enemies. The more deeply we penetrate into the spirit of this treaty, the more convinced we become of the impossibility of carrying it out. The exactions of this treaty are more than the German people can bear.

With a view to the re-establishment of the Polish State we must renounce indisputably German territory - nearly the whole of the Province of West Prussia, which is preponderantly German; of Pomerania; Danzig, which is German to the core; we must let that ancient Hanse town be transformed into a free State under Polish suzerainty.

We must agree that East Prussia shall be amputated from the body of the State, condemned to a lingering death, and robbed of its northern portion, including Memel, which is purely German.

We must renounce Upper Silesia for the benefit of Poland and Czecho-Slovakia, although it has been in close political connection with Germany for more than 750 years, is instinct with German life, and forms the very foundation of industrial life throughout East Germany.

Preponderantly German circles (*Kreise*) must be ceded to Belgium, without sufficient guarantees that the plebiscite, which is only to take place afterward, will be independent. The purely German district of the Saar must be detached from our empire, and the way must be paved for its subsequent annexation to France, although we owe her debts in coal only, not in men. . .

The German delegation again makes its demand for a neutral inquiry into the responsibility for the war and culpable acts in conduct. An impartial commission should have the right to investigate on its own responsibility the archives of all the belligerent countries and all the persons who took an important part in the war. Nothing short of confidence that the question of guilt will be examined dispassionately can leave the peoples lately at war with each other in the proper frame of mind for the formation of the League of Nations.

Treaties of peace signed by the great powers have, it is true, in the history of the last decades, again and again proclaimed the right of the stronger. But each of these treaties of peace has been a factor in originating and prolonging the world war. Whenever in this war the victor has spoken to the vanquished, at Brest-Litovsk and Bucharest, his words were but the seeds of future discord. . .

Accept, Mr. President, the expression of my distinguished consideration.

BROCKDORFF-RANTZAU

Source: *Source Records of the Great War, Vol. VII*, ed. Charles F. Horne, *National Alumni 1923*

Georges Clemenceau's Letter of Reply to the Objections of the German Peace Delegation, May 1919

Sir:

The Allied and Associated Powers have given the most earnest consideration to the observations of the German Delegation on the conditions of peace.

The reply protests against the peace, both on the ground that it conflicts with the terms upon which the armistice of November 11, 1918, was signed, and that it is a peace of violence and not of justice.

The protest of the German Delegation shows that they utterly fail to understand the position in which Germany stands today. They seem to think that Germany has only to "make sacrifices in order to attain peace," as if this were but the end of some mere struggle for territory and power. .

Germany has despoiled her neighbours of everything she could make use of or carry away. Germany has destroyed the shipping of all nations on the high seas, where there was no chance of rescue for their passengers and crews. It is only justice that restitution should be made and that these wronged peoples should be safeguarded for a time from the competition of a nation whose industries are intact and have even been fortified by machinery stolen from occupied territories.

If these things are hardships for Germany, they are hardships which Germany has brought upon herself. Somebody must suffer for the consequences of the war. Is it to be Germany, or only the peoples she has wronged?

Not to do justice to all concerned would only leave the world open to fresh calamities. If the German people themselves, or any other nation, are to be deterred from following the footsteps of Prussia, if mankind is to be lifted out of the belief that war for selfish ends is legitimate to any state, if the old era is to be left behind and nations as well as individuals are to be brought beneath the reign of law, even if there is to be early reconciliation and appeasement, it will be because those responsible for concluding the war have had the courage to see that justice is not deflected for the sake of convenient peace. . .

In the course of its discussion of their economic terms, and elsewhere, the German Delegation have repeated their denunciation of the blockade instituted by the Allied and Associated Powers. . .

If the Allied and Associated Powers have imposed upon Germany a blockade of exceptional severity, which throughout they have consistently sought to conform to the principles of international law, it is because of the criminal character of the war initiated by Germany and of the barbarous methods adopted by her in prosecuting it. . .

In conclusion the Allied and Associated Powers must make it clear that this letter and the memorandum attached constitute their last word.

They have examined the German observations and counter-proposals with earnest attention and care. They have, in consequence, made important practical concessions, but in its principles, they stand by the treaty.

They believe that it is not only a just settlement of the great war, but that it provides the basis upon which the peoples of Europe can live together in friendship and equality. At the same time it creates the machinery for the peaceful adjustment of all international problems by discussion and consent, whereby the settlement of 1919, itself can be modified from time to time to suit new facts and new conditions as they arise.

It is frankly not based upon a general condonation of the events of 1914-1918. It would not be a peace of justice if it were. But it represents a sincere and deliberate attempt to establish "that reign of law, based upon the consent of the governed, and sustained by the organized opinion of mankind" which was the agreed basis of the peace.

As such the treaty in its present form must be accepted or rejected.

The Allied and Associated Powers therefore require a declaration from the German Delegation within five days from the date of this communication that they are prepared to sign the treaty as it stands today.

If they declare within this period that they are prepared to sign the treaty as it stands, arrangements will be made for the immediate signature of the peace at Versailles. . .

French text signed: CLEMENCEAU.